

Curfew at Dawn

This impressive novel is the story of a young man who became blind and deaf at the age of sixteen, and of the manner of his coming to terms with this double affliction. It is also the story of the friend whose devoted care resolved certain problems of his own.

It is in no sense morbid. On the contrary, Miss Mannin has imbued it with courage and hope. In emphasizing that it is in no sense inspired by the life of Helen Keller, the author makes it clear that it is 'to do with dedication to service and bearing the unbearable'. The story moves from London to Devon and thence to the West of Ireland.

Since her first novel in the early 1920's, Miss Mannin's reputation as a writer of provocative and realistic fiction has been consistently maintained. She has kept pace with the modern world and today her writing is still fresh, vigorous and appealing.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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	ANN AND PETER IN JAPAN (Muller)

ETHEL MANNIN

Curfew at Dawn

'It is the shut, the curfew sent
From there where all surrenders come . . .

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS



HUTCHINSON OF LONDON

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD
178-202 Great Portland Street, London, W.1

London Melbourne Sydney
Auckland Bombay Toronto
Johannesburg New York



First published .

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*This book has been set in Spectrum type face. It has
been printed in Great Britain by The Anchor Press,
Ltd., in Tiptree, Essex, on Antique Wove paper and
bound by Taylor Garnett Evans & Co., Ltd., in
Watford, Herts*

to
THE DEAF-BLIND

*who live out their lives in darkness and
silence and valiantly come to terms with
their double affliction, and to the devoted
men and women who dedicate their lives
to helping them —*

with profound admiration

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Author's Note

A great deal of the conversation in this story is conducted not orally but manually, since the principal character is both blind and deaf. A quick manual speaker communicating in this way, through the finger-alphabet on the hand of the deaf-blind person, develops, naturally, a kind of shorthand in order to speed up the laborious process of spelling out each word. Also a quick recipient does not require every word spelt out or every sentence completed. In the interests of readability, however, I have thought it better to give the manual conversations not in this contracted form but exactly as though they were spoken by word of mouth.

In my exploration of this world of darkness and silence I have received valuable guidance and assistance from Mrs. Rachel Price, home visitor working for the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb, Mr. Donald Bell of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and Mr. Andrew Cooper, the inventor of the Arcaid, a typewriter for communicating with those of the deaf-blind who can read Braille, and which any sighted person can use.

All the characters in the story are fictitious, none based on any living person.

For assistance with proofs I am indebted to my good friend Mr. Gilbert Turner, F.L.A., as always.

E.M.

PART ONE

Darkness and Silence

'Be shellèd, eyes, with double dark . . .

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

I

AS FAR back as Gavin could remember summer holidays had always been spent at the Villa Napoli, his paternal grandparents' house on Killiney Bay, the Irish Bay of Naples. The holidays spent there with his parents were for two or at most three weeks; it was not until after his father's death, when he was fourteen, that he had been shipped there at the end of the school term for the entire holidays.

He had never known his father very well. Terence Edwards had been a newspaper man and away a good deal on foreign assignments. He had died very suddenly, at the age of forty, of a cerebral haemorrhage, whilst reporting in Indonesia. Gavin remembered him as a tall, thin, smiling man with thick dark hair and bright blue eyes, a kindly half-stranger who had taught him to swim and row and sail in the river Thames, and to ride in Richmond Park and through the heather and birch woods of Wimbledon Common. Home, then, had been a riverside house at Twickenham, with a boat tied up under a willow tree leaning out from the lawn. Soon after his father had died he had gone to live with his mother in a small flat in town. She explained that they had not owned the house at Twickenham and that his father had left no money to speak of and she must therefore get herself a job in an office. She didn't know whether he would be able to stay on at the same school when the term finished, or whether they would be able to go to Killiney that summer. She declared herself very worried, and on and off she cried.

He went back to school and she wrote that she had got a job in the London office of a big engineering firm, as secretary to the managing director, Sir James Hayton. It was a good job and the

boss had promised her a summer holiday, so perhaps they would be able to go to Killiney after all.

When he came home at the end of the summer term she was no longer worried and sad; she had new clothes and her hair done in a different way, which made her seem strange to him. They went to Dublin together by air, because, she said, as she only had a fortnight they didn't want to lose time travelling; but he should stay on with Grandma for the rest of the holidays—it would be more fun for him than in the London flat. This was true; now that there was no longer the house at Twickenham he would have liked to be at the Villa Napoli all the time. His Anglo-Irish grandparents were easy-going, a sailing-boat was anchored in the little cove of the private beach below a large wooded garden, and there was always a lively coming and going of a number of teenage neighbours with whom he went sailing and swimming in the Bay, and riding in the mountains behind.

He had also a strong feeling for the house itself; it was different—in the way that his grandmother was different from his mother; of a different world. He liked the smell of the house; it smelt old, with a pleasant musky smell which seemed made up of the pot pourri his grandmother made from the roses in the garden, gathering the petals of the full-blown blooms into shallow bowls and mixing them with spices to scent rooms and landings, and the smell of the apples laid out on the floors of the attics, and the smell of old dark furniture, and the smell of dried lavender, also from the garden, in the cupboards and chests in which linen was stored. The smell of the house had all this in it, but there was also something given out by the old walls and rafters and floor-boards and panelling; the smell of a house which has absorbed sunshine and the scent of tea-roses and wood-fires and bees-wax for generations.

That first holiday at the Villa Napoli after his father's death was one of mixed emotions for Gavin. There was the joy of being back in the beloved old house, of smelling the sea and peat fires again, of sailing and swimming, but the feeling in the house was different; people no longer drifted in and out at all hours of the day laughing and joking; there was no one there but his cousin Maureen, who

lived there, having been brought up by her grandmother almost from birth. Away from the house he and Maureen could laugh and feel free to enjoy the sea and sunshine as of old, but in the house their grandparents' grief for their son oppressed them. Both felt that their grandparents had suddenly become very old, though they were only in their sixties, which, as Maureen observed to Gavin, although it was of course old was not all *that* old. They seemed to have shrunk in their bodies, to have become bowed, and silent. Terence had been the last of their three sons; they had lost a son in the war, and Maureen's father who had been a racing motorist had killed himself in a crash. Their remaining child was a daughter married and living in Australia with her husband and family.

During the first fortnight of that visit the presence of Gavin's mother had created tension, she having so manifestly recovered from the shock of Terence's death, and his parents manifestly affronted by her cheerfulness. Maureen, who found her presence a relief, tried to make excuses for her: after all, Uncle Terry had been away such a lot, more than he had ever been home, and then, dying so far away and not seeing him dead must make it all seem unreal to her. . . .

The truth was that only Terence Edwards' parents deeply mourned him; no one else had known him well enough, neither his wife nor his son, certainly not his niece.

Gavin was glad when his mother's fortnight was up and she returned to London; she was unhandy in a boat and couldn't swim, and not much good even for going for walks with. When she had gone he and Maureen could enjoy themselves and the time passed all too quickly.

He was allowed to fly back from Dublin alone, which was exciting, and an adventure, but happiness ended at London airport. His mother had come to meet him. He saw her immediately he came out from the Customs into the big hall where people waited. She waved to him, smiling, and he thought she looked very smart. It was not until she had embraced him that he realized she was not alone—that the big, square, red-faced man beside her was with her.

'Sir James very kindly brought me here in his car,' she explained. 'He'd heard so much about you and wanted to meet you.'

The Boss, Gavin's mind registered, then went blank.

'So this is the young feller-me-lad,' he heard the big man saying, heartily.

Gavin looked away from the red smiling face with its heavy jowls. He could think of nothing whatever to say. His impulse was to cut and run, but he was hemmed in by people.

'Say how'd'ye-do to Sir James,' his mother coaxed, as though he were a little child.

His head down he mumbled the required formula. He knew by the push his mother gave him when they turned to go down the escalator to the ground floor that she was annoyed with him and that he was in for trouble when they got to the flat. He felt despairing and miserable, and utterly numb.

His suitcase was retrieved at the bottom of the baggage escalator. Outside the building a chauffeur stepped forward and seized the suitcase and led the way to a car. Gavin noticed that it was a Bentley; he always noticed cars. He and his mother and Sir James sat behind, in a row, Gavin squeezed in the middle. They took it in turns to fire questions at him—what sort of flight had he had, what was the weather like on the other side, how was Ireland. He could think of nothing to say but 'all right'. Finally they both gave up and addressed only occasional remarks to each other. When they arrived at the flat to Gavin's relief the Boss did not accept the invitation to come in for a drink.

The moment they were alone the anticipated storm broke over Gavin's head. Disgracing her, behaving in that idiotic fashion as though he hadn't a tongue in his head, making her feel so ashamed, making her look such a fool, what on earth was the matter with him?

Gavin didn't know. He only knew, miserably, that confronted with that massive presence, he had nothing to say. He had only intuition to go on, and intuition told him that the Boss was something more to his mother—but nothing that could be put into words.

He went back to school and when he came home for the

Christmas holidays his mother told him that the next term there would be his last; after Easter he would be going to a much better one, 'where,' she went on, very firmly, because she was nervous, 'you will be known as Gavin Hayton'.

He stared at her, with the numb look which so exasperated her.

'The reason is because as soon as you've gone back to school I am going to marry Sir James. I shall then be Lady Hayton and it avoids confusion if you take the same name.'

Then, as he continued to stare blankly at her, she abandoned the self-defensive hard manner and tried to plead with him.

'It means you can go to a good school and that we can have a nice home again instead of living in this poky little place. Daddy would be glad for us!'

Gavin had no comments to offer; none at all. The whole thing left him literally speechless. His father had been dead less than a year and his mother was getting herself a new husband. It was nothing he could understand and he tried not to think about it.

His mother continued to work at the office, so that until Christmas Eve he had the days to himself, except at the weekends. He found himself unable to concentrate on reading and he went out a good deal—to see films, to mooch distractedly about in museums and picture galleries, sometimes just to wander the streets, with no particular objective. One of his pastimes was to stand on London Bridge and watch cargo boats being loaded and unloaded. Perhaps when he had left school he could go to sea, one way or another, sail away, away, to the other side of the world, away from all that was hateful, travel like his father.

At weekends the red-faced man came in his splendid car and took him and his mother out; he took them for drives out into the country for lunch at hotels where the dining-rooms were of dark panelling and the waiters wore tail-coats; he was asked if he would like chicken or would he prefer duck and would mumble that he wasn't hungry, didn't mind, and his mother would be irritated and show it, and the Boss would be kind and jolly and friendly, but it was no good. One evening he took them to the circus, and Gavin hated it; he couldn't bear to look at the men and women who hurled themselves through the air on flying trapezes, high above

the audience, and hung on by their teeth or toes; the whole frightful business gave him vertigo; he felt sorry for the tigers made to sit on stools and made to do tricks at the flick of a whip, and the clowns he thought merely silly.

On Christmas Day they drove to Brighton for an enormous meal in a hotel. There were a great many children, most of them younger than himself, the little girls wearing party frocks, and during the meal everyone put on paper hats, and he felt terrible. He thought he might be sick; the room was so hot, the Christmas pudding so rich, the shrieks of little girls, and the blowing of whistles and waving of rattles from the boys, so confusing, that he had to be sick to get relief from it all. Holding his napkin to his mouth he rushed out of the dining-room and got to the Gentlemen's Cloakroom just in time. The Boss came after him and tried to make a jolly joke of it and told him not-to-worry, and after that he was allowed to sit in an armchair in the lounge near the door, through which he could see the cold grey-green beauty of the sea. The Boss went back to the dining-room and later, much later, returned and asked him if he was feeling better and saying that his mother would be along in a minute and then they would drive along the promenade with the window open and get some sea-breezes.

When his mother came she asked him harshly how he felt and observed that he was a fine one to bring out. The Boss joked about men never getting any sympathy from women, and winked at Gavin, who would have smiled politely if he could but at that moment was seized with violent hiccups.

The drive along the sea-front did in fact restore him a little, and by the time they got back to town he felt quite all right, but when they reached the flat his mother said he had better go to bed, adding that she was going out.

When he was in bed she brought him a glass of cold milk and some dry biscuits. He could see that she was still very angry with him.

'No one would think you were fourteen,' she said, violently, setting the tray down beside his bed.

He could only murmur, humbly, 'I'm sorry.'

'You make me sick!' she declared, in the same violent tone.

When she had gone he found himself thinking about that. That was what the Boss did to him—made him sick. But his mother clearly hadn't been made sick; he could hear her laughing in the next room, and presently there was the sound of dance music from the radio.

It was a relief when at last the front door slammed and he heard the car starting up down below. He went, then, in search of something to eat.

He was glad that the wedding and honeymoon took place during term time. During the holidays his name was changed to Hayton by deed poll. He spent the holidays in his mother's new home, a tall yellow house in a Regent's Park crescent, and longed only for the days to pass. He indulged in continuous fantasies of running away, of stealing the money and escaping to Ireland. In bed at nights he was troubled by the thought of his mother lying in bed with the big red-faced man who was her husband but not his father. He tried not to think of it, tried to switch his thoughts to other things, to the Villa Napoli, and the days when his father had been alive, but the hateful image persisted. In the mornings he would feel ashamed of his mother and hardly able to look at her or speak to her. The sight of his stepfather filled him with a black hatred. His mother made various suggestions for his entertainment: would he like to go riding? They could drive out to Wimbledon or Richmond if he didn't like riding in the Row. Would he like it if they went up the river to the Tower, or Greenwich? Would he like to go and see a film? He would sometimes agree to go and see a film, because then it didn't matter if she came with him, as he wouldn't have to talk to her, and if the film he wanted to see didn't interest her he was allowed to go alone; but he had no desire to go riding—it was something he had always done with his father, and no desire to do anything with her which would involve talking. He liked best to get out into Regent's Park on his own and wander about or take a boat out on the lake. He never went to the Zoo; he had been taken when he was small and hadn't liked it then, feeling sorry for the beasts from jungles and

forests shut up in cages with small backyards, and great birds that were used to perching on mountain crags shut up in aviaries. He liked Regent's Park and tried to forget that the prison for beasts and birds was part of it. He longed to go to the Open Air Theatre, but when his mother got tickets for the three of them to go and see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he developed a bilious attack and they went without him. Later in the week he was allowed to go by himself to a matinée and was completely enthralled, able to forget his mother and her husband for the first time since the marriage.

At home, which it remained impossible for him to think of as home, he remained mute in the presence of his stepfather. His mother scolded, coaxed, even wept—but they were the tears of exasperation—but it was no good. He could only think of the big red-faced man as the Boss, and he petrified him.

He gave it out at the new school that his stepfather was a Sir and stinking rich, but he made the declaration not boastfully but bitterly, contemptuously.

'He was sirred for making money during the war,' he declared, though he had actually no idea how his stepfather had acquired the title, or whether he had inherited it. Later on he was to think that his schoolboy judgment had not been far out.

He hated the new opulence. He hated the smell of the Boss's cigars. It was the smell of wealth—as the musky smell of the Villa Napoli was the smell of home. The long summer holidays there were the happiest time of the year—the only happy time. His stepfather only visited there once, shortly after the marriage. Gavin soon discovered that his father's parents didn't care for their daughter-in-law's new husband; and he was relieved, rather than scandalized, when Maureen assured him that his mother had only married 'old Sir James', for his money and title—adding, lightly, in the Irish idiom, and why wouldn't she, and wasn't it happy for her?

Was it happy for her? the boy wondered. When they had been a family, he and his mother and father, he hadn't had to think whether he knew them very well; they were his parents, his 'people', and that was all there was to it. It was only after his father's death that he realized how little he had really known



him, and only after his mother had married again that there grew up in him this feeling that she, too, was half a stranger to him. When a year later she had a baby, a boy, whom she called Peter, it seemed to remove her still further from him. He didn't tell anyone at school about this event; it embarrassed him. He was fifteen and had his own problems. He hated the new school and the games it required him to play and at which he was no good, and he kept it to himself as a guilty secret that he was determined to be a writer, like his father—only more truly a writer than his father, who had only written for newspapers, had ever been; he wanted to write poetry—was, indeed, already writing it—and was very well aware that this was not something you could own up to at a public school; or to your big-business-man stepfather, or your pretty fashionable mother. His father was the only person he could possibly have told. He remembered whole shelves of poetry in his father's library. In the Hayton house there were only such few books as his mother had brought with her from Richmond and placed in his room, to help him, she said, in his studies. There was a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a Collected Shakespeare, the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and a few dictionaries, French, Latin, German, and the Oxford Concise. The rest of the books she had sold before leaving Twickenham; there were about two thousand of them, and no room for them in the flat to which she was moving, and sorting them was quite beyond her, her own reading never having gone beyond romantic novels and the women's magazines.

Now that she was Lady Hayton the future she planned for her son was Oxford, a degree in economics, and a post in the London office of her husband's firm. He had a wonderful opportunity, she told Gavin when he was fifteen; in time he might be the agent at the Far Eastern end, in Singapore, or Hongkong, a very important and highly paid position. Gavin replied that what he wanted to read at Oxford—'If I ever get there!'—was English literature and philosophy. His mother smiled sweetly and said that what was most important was to study for a career. . . .

SOON after that, during term time, Gavin went down with a tubercular lung and was sent to a sanatorium among the Hampshire pine woods—which he vastly preferred to his public school. He lay on a verandah and wrote a good deal of melancholy introspective verse and was happy. Whilst he was there, a young man called Hugh Ross, a fellow patient, introduced him to a poet he had not previously heard of—Gerard Manley Hopkins. He found in this poetry a startling newness of imagery, a strange and exciting usage of words. Some of it he found difficult to understand—‘you’ll come to it in time,’ the young man assured him—but where he did understand the emotional impact was considerable. *The Habit of Perfection* moved him strangely:

*‘Elected silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorlèd ear . . .*

and the lines,

*‘Be shellèd, eyes, with double dark
And find the uncreated light’ . . .*

Ross read the poem aloud to him and explained about sprung rhythm. Gavin copied the poem out and learned it by heart. He liked to recite it aloud. Eventually the young man gave him a copy of the collected poems and helped him to an understanding of other short pieces, insisting always that they must be read aloud. It was the first intellectual excitement Gavin had ever shared. The only discussions of poetry he had known till then were the stilted

ones of 'Eng. Lit.' at school. Now someone was talking of poetry as though it were a living thing like the sap in a tree or the blood in your veins. It was his first excited youthful discovery that other people had the same ideas. That one was not alone.

Gavin did not have this new friend for long; Ross had already been there for some months and was anxious to be cured and discharged. But Gavin was in no such hurry. He was anxious to remain until he could be declared strong enough to travel direct to Ireland. If he couldn't return to school he was determined not to return to the Hayton house. Also there were days when he didn't feel so well.

He was still there over Christmas, thereby releasing his mother to go off to Switzerland for winter sports with her husband—not that either of them had any real intention of doing much except looking at the snow and watching other people. Gavin was delighted when January brought snow to Hampshire and turned the pine woods into an old-fashioned Christmas card. His mother sent coloured picture postcards of ski-ing slopes and wrote of the beauty of sunshine and snow. There was no sunshine with the Hampshire snow, but the boy felt peace come dropping slow there, as in the Yeats poem.

But the snow melted and snowdrops appeared under the trees in the sanatorium grounds, and he was pronounced cured and fit to travel. He begged his mother to take him straight to London airport, for the Dublin 'plane, and the sanatorium doctor strongly endorsed the idea of convalescence in Ireland in preference to London. His mother, after a convincing show of reluctance, finally agreed. Gavin was cured of t.b., to be sure, but with a young child you couldn't be too careful. Gavin, too, was always so much happier with his grandparents. And the sea and mountain air would of course be so much better than London air, particularly at that time of the year. It would also be very convenient if Gavin could spend a few months at the Villa Napoli, as James had a hankering for Paris for Easter—in fact they were really all set to go.

So Gavin flew to Dublin alone—after his mother had several times asked him if he was sure he would be all right, if he really was strong enough to travel alone—and Maureen met him at

Colinstown in her long low scarlet sports' model car, in which they drove like the wind out of the airport and along the lanes between the flat green fields, and they laughed because of the wind in their faces, and the speed, and Gavin wanted to make a poem about Maureen's red hair blowing in strands across her eyes, and the way she kept tossing it back, and they roared into the city of Dublin and out of it and along the Vico Road above the sea, and drew up at the white house standing in the Italianate garden above Killiney Bay, and Gavin felt that he had come home.

He felt happy and at peace, but also, strangely, he didn't feel well. His head ached and he felt rather sick, and curiously tired, though the flight had been smooth and quick. He went to bed early, climbing the stairs slowly, with dragging feet. In his room he stood at the window looking out across the garden to the pale glimmer of the sea and listened to an owl calling in a tree somewhere near at hand.

He was sick and feverish during the night, with blinding headache. In the morning there could be no question of his getting up. He was delirious with fever. His grandmother sent for a doctor, who had no difficulty in diagnosing meningitis.

The night-glimmer of the sea and the crying of the owl were the last things he was to see and hear; through pain and delirium he was being drawn steadily away from light and sound into the uncharted world of darkness and silence.

FOR a time he was not completely blind, and although his hearing was defective anyone putting a mouth close to his ear could with an effort make him hear. He was vaguely aware of his inability to hear or see properly, but felt too ill to care. Both faculties went some time before he realized it. All was fever and darkness and delirium. For weeks, though he had had no idea how long it was, there had been very little response to light or sound, but it had all been part of the chaos and confusion of suffering. The outside world had ceased to have reality. Reality was fever and sickness and blinding headaches—the literally blinding headaches of meningitis.

Then the abatement of fever, and coolness again, but exhaustion with it, and period of coma, and weakness unutterable. But the struggle with death was over; he was going to live, having been neither young enough nor old enough to die of that particular disease.

His mind cleared and he became fully conscious and aware. He opened his eyes into total darkness, and weakly, drowsily, believed it to be night. He resolved that when his grandmother, or the nurse, or someone, came in again he would ask them to have the curtains opened; he never cared to sleep in a completely darkened room. He lay dozing lightly, then became wakeful, wondering what time it was. He had long ago lost count of what day of the week it was, but now at least he could know the time.

He groped for the switch of the bedside lamp and pressed it, and nothing happened. He supposed the bulb had gone. He raised himself a little in bed, weakly, resting on his elbow, and shouted,

calling his grandmother and could not hear his voice. My voice has gone, he thought, and sank back into bed, exhausted by the effort, wishing someone would come.

Then someone did come. He felt a hand on his shoulder, a hand brushing his hair back from his forehead, was aware of a face close to his, of a familiar perfume, and knew that his mother was there.

He asked, pleased, 'When did you arrive?' Then, clutching, at his throat, 'I can't seem to get my voice back. Lost my voice. Can you hear what I'm saying? Why don't you switch on the light? I can't see a thing!'

The hand withdrew from his shoulder and thin dry hands took his and he knew that it was his grandmother.

'What's the matter? Why don't you say something? Why don't you put on the light?' he demanded.

He felt his mother's face close to his cheek, warm, wet, and the grip on his shoulder was renewed, tightening, so that her fingers dug into his flesh. He tried, weakly, to pull away from her, swept by a panic terror, the frenzy of the trapped creature.

'I can't see!' he shouted. 'I can't speak! Say something!'

The face withdrew and the hands released his shoulder. Then there were his grandmother's dry fingers opening his own, resolutely, holding them open, and her forefinger writing in the palm of his hand.

It was a few minutes before he realized what the movements meant, then he began to concentrate, desperately. He failed three times to get the first word, shaking his head, snatching his hand away, but always the thin dry fingers came back, stubbornly, opening his, exposing the palm, and slowly, laboriously writing. He began to make it out: 'Y-o-u-r.' When he finally got that the strain lessened and he got the next word, which was long, at the first attempt: 'i-l-l-ne-ss'; and the rest was not too difficult: has affected sight hearing. Then: patience London specialist.

He cried, wildly, 'Will I be able to see again? I must be able to! I can't live like this! I'd rather die!'

He began to sob, weakly. When he was calmer he felt the writing in his palm again: Be brave.

He repeated, desperately, 'Will I be able to see again? I don't mind not hearing, if only I can see! Will I? Tell me!'

He was aware of the pause before his grandmother's finger wrote, resolutely: In time. Perhaps.

He tried to snatch his hand away after that, but it was held firmly and other words written in it, but he was no longer concentrating, drowning in despair. Then his hand was released and he felt a movement at the side of the bed and cried out, in new panic, 'Don't leave me!'

Another hand took his, cool, firm, smelling faintly of antiseptic, and he realized that the nurse was there. A thermometer was thrust into his mouth, fingertips were on his pulse.

Then he was brought a bowl of warm water, soap, a towel, a comb. The soap was put into his hands, his hands immersed in the water.

'How can I, when I can't see?' he complained.

But he did it, and combed his hair, and struggled into the dressing-gown held for him, and when he was helped out to the side of the bed shuffled his feet into the slippers pushed gently against his feet.

Then with his mother on one side of him and his grandmother on the other—and he knew that it was these two—he was helped across the room to a chair placed by the open window. He sank into it, exhausted from the effort and realizing his weakness. He felt the sun warm on his face and was aware of a scent of narcissus coming from somewhere nearby—there was in fact a jug filled with them on the window-sill.

He asked the time and knew that it was his mother who wrote into his hand that it was noon.

Exhausted from shock and strain, and by sheer physical weakness, he dozed a little in the early spring sunshine.

The process of adjustment was very slow, but it had begun already before he left for London. It was not yet acceptance, resignation, but it was the assertion of the will to cope with the disability. With returning strength he soon found his way alone along the corridor to the bathroom, and down the stairs and

across the hall to the front door. There was a sun terrace, facing out across the bay, with three shallow steps down to a gravel drive, and after that he could go no further alone. With different people, his mother, his grandmother, Maureen, he took walks in the garden, checking his whereabouts by touch and smell—the stone parapet of the low wall bounding the rose-garden, a sudden scent of hyacinths indicating an urn—a landmark for the path ahead. His outstretched, anticipating, hand would find the upraised arm of the bronze figure of the Dancing Faun—brought back from Pompeii by his grandparents on one of their Italian journeys—in a sunk garden, one shallow step down from the smooth column of a pergola. Groping he would find the escalonia hedge flanking the steps down to the beach. The steps were easy to negotiate, and then there would be the sand of the seashore under his feet, and the sense of the sea close, the strong smell of it, and the knowledge of its sound which came to him with its smell, so that he seemed to hear it. He was resolved one day to swim again, but it was then too early in the year, and he had not yet the necessary self-confidence. One day, too, he was determined to feel the sheets of a sailing-boat in his hands again. The Edwards' sailing-boat or another. There were still things to do. And poems to write. In London he had a small portable typewriter; he could use that. And if they really couldn't give him back his sight, those specialists in London, he would learn Braille. Was there any poetry done into Braille? he wondered. At least he wouldn't have to go back to school now. Or would they want to send him to some blind school? But he wouldn't go. Nothing in the world should make him go. He would die, rather. Now at least he wouldn't have to study economics and take a degree and subsequently a position in the City. Now he would never be 'our agent in Singapore', or anywhere else.

He regained strength fairly quickly, but dissipated his energies in bursts of irritability over frustrations, chiefly in connection with communication. He invariably understood what his grandmother and Maureen wrote in his hand, but complained that his mother wrote too quickly, or that she 'tickled', and he would snatch his hand away, angrily. Sometimes, infuriated at the inability to hear

his own voice, he would shout, half hysterically, and once when his mother wrote in his hand that he should try not to shout he shouted back to her, 'How can I tell when I'm shouting?', and went into a sulk, bitterly resentful. In bed that night he buried his head under the clothes and wept despairingly. At such times he would wish to die and even plan means to end his life. At other times the will to score over his difficulties would be strong in him and every small thing he could achieve for himself strengthened his morale.

The day he and his mother were to leave for London Maureen wrote in his hand, 'If London no good come back live with us we :ll love you.'

It was the longest piece she had written him and he made it out without difficulty.

'I'll come back, you bet!' he shouted to her. 'I'll die if they keep me shut up in London with old money-bags!'

His mother was present when he said it, and for a moment in spite of his affliction she hated him. Maureen laughed, involuntarily, then seeing the look on her aunt's face murmured, confusedly, 'He means no harm, the creature!'

She took Gavin's hand and wrote in it, 'Come back soon!'

He laughed, happily.

'You bet!' he repeated.

The girl found it hard to realize that the bright, luminous blue eyes turned on her were sightless, and looking at him then her own filled with tears. She was nineteen, and could not feel romantic about a schoolboy of sixteen, but she loved him. Of this he was aware; they all loved him, as she had said, but his need was for the closeness of just one person upon whom he could depend, who would be his eyes and his ears, his other self, through whom he could break out of the claustrophobic world of darkness and silence—until They, the great They in London, could do something for him. He didn't mind how many operations it meant, but they must make him be able to see again, at least, even if they couldn't give him back his hearing as well. That wasn't so important, so long as he could see. He couldn't live in that silent darkness all his life. He would go mad. Life wouldn't be worth

living. He could bear it now because it wasn't going to be for ever; or even long. They had to do something for him. They had to.

He knew, because eventually his mother had told him, that he had had meningitis, and at the sanatorium he had been told something about what could happen. At the time it had seemed just a hospital horror story. Certainly nothing that could ever conceivably happen to oneself. He knew about Helen Keller, not in any special context but as part of his general knowledge and without any particular interest; it was a wonderful story that a child of seven, blind, deaf and dumb since the age of two, could be taught language and develop into a highly intelligent and cultured woman with a university education, but it was all remote from reality as one understood it. The intellect gave assent to it without the imagination comprehending it. It was as unimaginable as being dead.

In the 'plane to London he thought of his stepfather.

He said, violently, loudly, to his mother's embarrassment, 'When we get back I don't want *him* coming and holding my hand and trying to write in it!'

She wrote in his hand, 'He will be sym——'

He snatched his hand away before she could finish. It was not, anyhow, necessary that she should finish.

'I don't want sympathy!' he shouted.

He kept both hands tightly closed, refusing further communication.

He leaned his head back against the window-frame, staring out with his sightless gaze. He felt the vibrations of the 'plane and was intensely aware of his mother's perfume, and presently tea was served. He groped for and found the plastic cup and saucer, the plate of sandwiches, the biscuits.

Presently he said, pursuing his thoughts, 'If they can't do anything for me in London I want to go back to Grandma.'

She pressed his hand as a sign of assent—because it was too difficult to explain, spelling it out letter by letter into his hand that that would be impossible, that his grandparents were elderly and that it would be too much responsibility for them—and that she for her part couldn't, in any case, shift her responsibility on to

her in-laws. It was unfortunate that for Gavin home was the Villa Napoli and nowhere else; unfortunate for his mother, too, she thought, bitterly. Her heart ached for him, but she felt herself deserving of sympathy too. Gavin was not the whole of her life; there was James, and little Peter. And Gavin remained so hostile to his stepfather. It really was all a very great problem; a very great tragedy.

Back in London Gavin was sunk in despair, alternating between fits of weeping and paroxysms of nervous irritability. But for the child Peter, and Helga, the German girl who looked after him he would have had a complete breakdown.

He had befriended Helga when she had first come to the house, eighteen months ago. He had felt sorry for her because it was her first time away from home and she was homesick. She had written to him when he was in the sanatorium and once, on her day off, had come to see him, asking him not to let his mother know. She had not come again because the visit had not really been a success. It had been a warm-hearted gesture of gratitude on her part, because he had been kind to her, a friend when she had badly needed one, but away from the familiar atmosphere both discovered they had very little to say to each other. At the house he had seemed a kind elder brother; at the sanatorium he had become an intellectual schoolboy with whom she had nothing in common.

For his part he had found her warm-heartedness a little boring. He had Hugh Ross at that time and was not short of lively conversation. Now he was desperate for communication, for contact, and his mother's clumsy efforts drove him frantic; she failed with him because he was hostile to her and did not co-operate; and because he did not co-operate he unnerved her and she failed, and ended by trying to avoid communication.

In those first almost unbearable weeks he spent all his indoor time in the nursery at the top of the house playing desultorily with the child and making some sort of conversation with Helga—simply for the sake of not feeling himself enclosed in that inner world of darkness and silence. On fine days when Helga took the child to the park he went with them. He supposed that out of her

affection for him she pitied him, but at least his condition did not embarrass her, as he was aware it did his mother. Helga never tired of trying to reach him in the dark silence, always laboriously spelling into his hand, endlessly patient, all her dull virtues taking on a new lustre.

Fortunately, soon after Gavin had been registered by the doctor who examined him in London as deaf-blind the County Council Welfare Authority sent one of their Home Teachers to visit him, a Mrs. Williams. The doctor had warned them to expect the visit. He explained that Mrs. Williams would arrange for Gavin to have lessons in Braille, if he wished, and would explain the finger-alphabet, which was very simple and a much quicker means of communication than writing in block capitals in the hand; it could be learned in half an hour and speed was merely a matter of practice. The help the Home Teacher would give, he added, was a free social service.

Hayton said quickly that he appreciated that, 'but I think we'd sooner make our own private arrangements.'

'You can, of course, but Mrs. Williams would be the best person to consult about it. She will be able to put you in touch with someone suitable. You will find her a very nice person.'

Vivien put in with a strained smile, 'We're hoping that none of all this will be necessary. We have the appointment with Sir Kingsley Cummings—'

'Quite so, but it would be unwise, I'm afraid, to hope for very much from it. Cummings is an extremely able man, in the first rank, in fact, but not even a top-ranking specialist can perform miracles, and in these meningitis cases—'

The famous eye specialist was only one of several to whom Gavin was taken; he could only confirm, expensively, what the doctor had said: that he could not, unfortunately, perform miracles. They consulted an equally famous ear man and drew another blank. Then a business acquaintance told Hayton about a very celebrated Viennese doctor who was in London for some medical conference; his gimmick—it was Hayton's word for it—was considering the body as a whole. Hayton was assured by the man who recommended the Viennese that he was a man of rare

spiritual qualities. This, however, did not preclude him from charging enormous fees, and all that came of the interview was that he held out some hope of a degree of hearing being restored eventually and said that the boy should wear a hearing-aid, since through it he might at least feel the reverberations of sound and movement. He reminded them that Helen Keller had once stood in a church and felt the reverberations of the organ playing; if such reverberations could be transmitted to their son it would be something, he suggested, since it would give him some contact with the external world other than through the hands. But the apparatus did nothing for him and he had no faith in it; he wore it only because his mother begged him to.

To the Home Teacher he responded instantly. The very grasp of her hand gave him confidence; he felt it as a small fine hand gripping his firmly, and it gave him an expression of the woman which was remarkably accurate, for Clare Williams was herself small and fine as to physique, yet capable and strong, of abundant but disciplined energy. Her manner was quiet and gentle but confident, like her handshake. She was forty-five, a widow, and completely dedicated to her work for the deaf-blind.

Vivien had already explained to Gavin about the Home Teacher, laboriously printing it into the palm of his hand, so that when she arrived the introduction was quickly effected. When they had shaken hands Mrs. Williams wrote rapidly, 'Let us sit down,' and still holding his hand guided him to a settee. They sat down together, Vivien sitting in an armchair opposite.

Mrs. Williams asked him, 'Would you like to learn Braille?'

He replied eagerly, 'Very much! I must be able to read!'

'I will arrange for a friend of mine a man who works at a hospital to teach you. In the meantime learn the finger-alphabet. Very quick and easy. Like this.'

She wrote A in the palm of his hand, then touched his thumb. Then E and touched his forefinger, and in this way ran the vowels off on his fingertips. He grasped the idea immediately. Then she went through the alphabet, first tracing the letter in the palm of his hand in block, then indicating it in the finger-alphabet. In half an hour he had it by heart.

She wrote in his palm, 'I will leave a card with your mother with it all on then you can practice together. Next time I come we will speak together in this way—very quickly.'

'When will you come again?'

'Today week.'

'What do you look like?'

'Gavin!' Vivien exclaimed, involuntarily.

'It's natural he should wish to know,' Clare murmured, and taking his hand placed the tips of his fingers on her forehead and passed them down over her small straight nose to her lips, down over her neat chin and up to her high cheekbones.

He asked, 'What colour is your hair?'

She replied on his fingers, 'Grey.'

He got it without difficulty.

'I see you as small and grey—is that right?'

She pressed his hand in assent, then said on his fingers, 'I must go now,' and he felt the movement of her rising.

His face clouded. He rose to his feet, holding out his hand.

'I am sorry you must go. Thank you for coming. It's been wonderful!'

She took his hand and shook it and he felt the movement of her departure and the emptiness of the room.

AFTER that Gavin was impatient of block capitals spelled out laboriously into the palm of his hand; with the vowels at your fingertips why spell it all out? The consonants, too, were so quick and easy—the lovely H brushed off the palm in a single swift gesture, the simple W no more than a clasp of all four fingers the T merely a finger pointed at the side of the hand—all of it so easy to remember and so quick. He practised on his own hand, his fingers flying. *This is communication*, he wrote rapidly, with his right hand on his left, *now I know the meaning of that expression about having everything at your fingertips. I have this at my fingertips, this lovely manual alphabet. All my life at my fingertips. My life in my hands!*

It was tremendously exciting, but it was not his own fingers which had to fly over his eager receptive hand but other people's—only who was there? Mrs. Williams wasn't coming again for a week; she had promised to send a young man to teach him Braille, but he couldn't just sit talking to himself on his fingers for days on end until one or other of them turned up, and in the meantime there was only his mother, to whom he had never had much to say at any time, and whose efforts at talking to him on his fingers were slower than her block capitals in his hand, his stepfather to whom he had nothing at all to say, and faithful patient Helga.

She was, as he had guessed she would be, only too eager to learn the manual alphabet; her memory was good and she had memorized it within half an hour and within a few days acquired rapidity. Within weeks he was having her read to him from the newspapers, and whatever his mother wanted to say to him was conveyed through Helga's flying fingers.

It was communication, and as such immensely valuable, but it was not what he desperately needed, which was communion.

Vivien made no bones about the fact that she found attempting to communicate with Gavin frustrating and a strain. It was a strain for everyone—except, apparently, Helga—she continually declared; people often didn't try to communicate with the poor boy not because they weren't sympathetic but because it was all too difficult and they were self-conscious. James, the kindest of men, was a case in point, she told her friends; he was desperately shy of Gavin since he had become afflicted.

The truth was, she innerly acknowledged, poor Gavin's presence in the flat was an embarrassment, though this was something she never said out loud, not even to James. But then it wasn't necessary to say it to him because it was all too obvious that he also felt it. When people came in for drinks, or to dinner, or parties, or luncheon, it was impossible to exclude Gavin as though he were an idiot, but it was also impossible in the real sense to include him. She would write the names of the guests one after another into the palm of his hand and they would grasp his hand and he would shout 'Hullo!' or 'How d'you do?' and that was the beginning and end of communication. No one seemed able to think of anything to say that seemed worth the labour of spelling it all out into block capitals into his hand, so he sat with them and ate with them in darkness and silence whilst they chattered of films and plays they had seen, books they had read, places they had visited or intended to visit, and carefully looked away when he had any difficulties in dealing with the food on his plate.

Gavin hated these social occasions and after a few of them asked to be allowed to eat in the nursery with Helga and the child, to which, on James's advice, she finally agreed. 'No point in embarrassing everyone, including the boy himself!' Hayton declared, and she had to acknowledge that they did all feel more at ease without Gavin there. It was balm to her when her friends told her how much they sympathized with her in this terrible tragedy, and how brave they thought her in the way she had adapted herself.

'I don't feel brave,' she assured them, with a stricken look. 'I just feel heartbroken.'

It was true, too. Along with the self-pity, the sense of life having been spoiled for the second time, her heart did ache for her son.

She had been so proud of him—such an attractive boy, with his father's looks and charm, and so gifted, with a marked talent for writing . . . not that she would have wished him to make writing a career when there were such possibilities for him to become rich and powerful in the business world. James could have done so much for him—far beyond anything poor Terry could have done. It was all so bitter; so terribly sad. What was to become of him? There was not only the problem of his future, but the really pressing problem of what to do with him, for the best, *now*.

She discussed it endlessly with James, sharing pity evenly between herself and her son. James was a great comfort to her, she told everyone; he was so understanding and kind.

Hayton was in fact possessed of all of the fundamentally selfish person's capacity for material generosity. It was heart-warming to give, thereby acquiring a sense of power and earning gratitude, when one could afford to do so without even noticing it. Similarly he was always ready to help where he could do so without inconvenience to himself. In this way he was generous and kind to his employees, his ex-wives, his discarded mistresses. He responded less readily to the material dilemmas of his friends and business acquaintances. If a man was in any kind of financial trouble it was usually his own fault. It hardly commanded sympathy. And you had to draw the line somewhere. He drew it at the point at which giving and helping gave him no pleasure.

It was his deepest conviction that there was no problem which money could not solve. It could even, he maintained, give you something as abstract as peace of mind, because when you had money enough you could arrange your life as it suited you. He saw nothing wrong with the idea that a woman, twenty years his junior, should be willing to marry him for money and position. She would be nothing but a fool not to realize the material advantages of becoming the fourth Lady Hayton.

It was a fair enough bargain: she had material security and he had the satisfaction, physical and emotional, of an attractive wife who could be relied upon to stick to him—because of her dependence on him. This fourth marriage in his fifties had to work, and he was confident that it would; he didn't flatter himself Vivien was

in love with him; that would be expecting too much; but she was sincerely fond of him—and at least not averse to him, physically (he was after all a vigorous man, still, and in not bad shape considering all the expense-account lunches and dinners he had been required to eat down through the years). For the rest, she had been a devoted and loyal secretary and he had not been wrong in believing that she would make an affectionate and loyal wife.

He had thought from the beginning it was a pity she had the boy; he had anticipated a jealousy situation, and the boy's manifest resentment of him had seemed to him natural enough, but he had believed money would take care of that, too, for whilst he was young he could be packed off to his father's people in Ireland for the school holidays, and later there were always holidays abroad for young men with good allowances—and eventually he would be shipped to the Far East. The meningitis business had been the damndest thing. But money could and would take care of that too. The problem of Gavin's future which, understandably so, worried Vivien, would be resolved, and the immediate problem of what to do with him now seemed already, since the visit of the pleasant Mrs. Williams, on the way to a solution. There was that young male nurse she had promised to send along as a companion as soon as she could, he reminded Vivien.

'That was only for evenings—to teach him Braille——'

'But if the boy takes to him and he turns out to be a decent young fellow why shouldn't we make him a proposition as full-time companion? If he proved to be the right type money would be no object—you know that!' He warmed to the subject. 'It would be the chance of a life time for a young man like that—he can't earn much at the hospital. We could fix him and Gavin up with a little place in the country—you know, grow their own vegetables, run a little poultry farm. Or a cottage in Cornwall—raise violets for the London market. Cultivate mushrooms. Something like that. Gavin would have an allowance, of course, and the young man his salary, and living rent free like that they'd be in clover!'

James was wonderful, she thought, fondly. So clear-headed and practical. She was grateful to him for making it all sound so promising—and so simple.

5

SOON after this conversation which Vivian found so heartening Mrs. Williams came again bringing a dark taciturn-looking fortyish man with her. Vivien regarded him with misgiving; he could do with a haircut, she thought, and wondered where he got the long scar down his right cheek. He merely nodded, without smiling, when Mrs. Williams introduced him as Mr. Laurence Oakes, 'the young man I promised to bring to teach Gavin Braille.'

Vivien took them along to Gavin's room, where Helga was giving him, on his fingers, the headlines from the evening paper. He felt her sudden movement and asked what was the matter.

'Visitors,' she told him. 'Mrs. Williams and a man.'

She got up, edging her way out of the room, round the three who had entered it. Mrs. Williams went over to Gavin and took both his hands. He smiled and rose to his feet.

'I'd know it was you,' he said, happily. 'You smell of violets.'

She touched his face, then said on his fingers, 'I've brought Laurence Oakes to see you. You'll find him a good manual speaker.'

She relinquished Gavin's hand and gave it to Oakes, who wrote rapidly, 'Hullo!'

Gavin laughed and shouted, 'Hullo!' and then, 'What do you look like?'

The sombre face kindled into a slightly wry smile.

'Dark. Scarface. Beatnik,' he answered, then raised the boy's hand and pushed the fingers through his thick hair and ran a finger down the scar on his right cheek, down the bridge of a strong,

jutting nose, along the line of a generous mouth. Then he wrote rapidly, 'One of those frank open criminal faces!'

Gavin laughed, then felt his hand taken by Mrs. Williams.

'He is very nice and has a nice face,' she wrote. 'Also he swims and sails and likes poetry.'

Oakes took over.

'Only some. Loathe Eliot.'

Gavin laughed delightedly.

'Who do you like?'

'Bottomley, Flecker, Hodgson. Early Yeats. Nothing intellectual.'

'I don't know Bottomley——'

Mrs. Williams rose, smiling.

'I've another call to make,' she said to Laurence, 'so I'll leave you two to it.'

She took Gavin's hands and wrote on his fingers:

'I must go now. Laurence will tell me how you get on together. Goodbye now.'

Gavin got to his feet, still holding her hand.

'Thank you for bringing Laurence along. He's the friend I've been longing for!'

Laurence crossed the room to open the door for her.

'He's a nice kid,' he said.

She held out a hand to him, smiling.

'Perhaps he's what you've been looking for!'

He took her hand but did not return her smile.

'Perhaps,' he said, curtly, and turned back to the boy who stood waiting, eagerly, by the table. He laid his hand on the boy's arm and they resumed their seats.

'Tell me about Bottomley,' Gavin urged.

Laurence told him, 'I want to teach you Braille. When you have mastered that you can have all the poets you want.'

From a flat leather case lying on the table he extracted a Braille alphabet sheet, took Gavin's right hand and placed the forefinger on the single raised dot of the letter A, then touched the tip of Gavin's thumb, the A of the manual alphabet.

He explained, 'The Braille alphabet consists of combinations of

six dots, known as cells. Each cell is two dots wide, three dots deep. We will go through the alphabet. Repeat each letter aloud as you touch it.'

When they reached Z, Gavin cried, despairingly, 'I'll never learn it! I'll never remember it!'

'Nonsense! Like the manual it's only practice. You must work on it all day and every day. Is there someone in the house who can work with you? Your mother?'

'She's hopeless. There's the German girl who was reading to me from the paper when you arrived. She soon picked up the manual.'

Get her to hear you the letters over and over again until you've mastered them. Then we will come to simple exercises. I've known people memorize the alphabet in a few days. Make a big effort.'

Gavin felt him rise from his seat and cried, 'You're not going?'

'I must. I've an all-alone old man to visit. I'll come again today week.'

Gavin insisted on going to the front door with Laurence. He told him, 'My father's people have a lovely old house on Killiney Bay, near Dublin. I love going there. It's my real home. I hate this place. I wish we could go there together.'

Laurence pressed his arm, then wrote on his fingers, 'One day perhaps. Work hard at the Braille.'

There was again the pressure of his hand on Gavin's arm, then the movement of his going.

When the door slammed Vivien went out into the hall and laid a hand on Gavin's arm. Both she and Hayton had heard the boy's last words to Laurence. She saw that her son's face was radiant with happiness. She wanted to say something to him, something about being glad he liked Mr. Oakes, but he pulled away from her.

'I want to be alone. I want to write something!'

He brushed past her and went on down the corridor to his room, feeling the walls and the doors with one hand as he passed. She stood looking after him, affronted, resentful, hurt, the ready tears springing to her eyes.

She had asked Mrs. Williams if she would spare a few minutes for a talk with her and her husband before she left the house that evening. She stood a little in awe of this woman who was so unlike her conception of a social worker. She had expected a dowdy, spinsterish type, what she thought of as a missionary type—never having met a missionary—and had not been prepared for this well-dressed, charming woman who was the embodiment of her conception of a 'lady'. James had also been very surprised and wondered why she did this work, which must surely be very dreary.

When Mrs. Williams emerged from Gavin's room on the ground floor Helga, who had been hovering about outside for the purpose, as instructed, conducted her upstairs to the drawing-room, where the Haytons waited among a welter of massed flower-arrangements, gilded furniture, velvet curtains, chandeliers. Clare Williams, whose tastes were austere, thought it all overdone to the point of vulgarity—tycoon's rococo Laurence would probably call it—smiled pleasantly, seated herself on the Louis Quinze chair indicated, declined both whisky and brandy, explaining that she had another call to make and never drank when working, and waited for the purpose of the interview to be revealed.

'It's very good of you to do this work,' Hayton said, pouring himself a large whisky.

Clare said, accepting a cigarette from the gold case Vivien held out to her, 'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'Well, there are obviously more lucrative posts for a woman such as yourself.' He added, bluntly, 'Unless, of course, you do it as unpaid social work.'

'We are all paid staff,' she told him.

She knew what he was driving at but she was not disposed to tell him. There were people to whom she could talk of Roy, her husband, made blind and deaf when his 'plane crashed in the war, Roy dying after a few years and leaving her driven by pain and pity to lose herself in the suffering of others; but not to these people; to them she was not drawn. Only to Gavin. She was glad this extrovert tycoon was not his father.

She drew on her cigarette and waited for them to come to the point.

Vivien, who felt that they had been snubbed, said quickly, 'We are so grateful to you for bringing Mr. Oakes along. It would be wonderful if he and Gavin took to each other.'

'They seem to have. I left them discussing poetry.'

'That's wonderful. Poetry is a passion with Gavin. We were hoping——' She hesitated and looked across to Hayton.

He came to her rescue, promptly, glad to take over, impatient of her diffidence.

'Not to beat about the bush, Mrs. Williams, we were hoping Mr. Oakes might prove to be a suitable person to be a permanent companion to Gavin. We'd have to know something about his background, of course——'

'That I'm afraid I can't tell you. I know nothing about him. I only know he's a very good manual speaker, very good with deaf-blind people of all ages. He doesn't talk about himself and one can't question people about their private lives and personal history. He was in the ward at the hospital where I was visiting a deaf-blind old man who had been knocked down in the street. He was intensely interested and asked me about the finger-alphabet I was using to talk to the old man. I left a card with him—like the one I left with you—and when I came again a few days later he was talking manually to the old man. He came to me after that to learn to read and write Braille and offered to help with our work—on a voluntary basis. He's visited a number of people in the past two years and does a wonderful job.'

'And you don't know anything about him?'

She smiled.

'Only that, and that people like him, and that he has endless patience—and not much use for oral language.'

'Perhaps he'll tell Gavin something about himself,' Vivien suggested. 'Boys of that age are never shy of asking direct questions.'

'The point is,' Hayton insisted, 'Would it be any good discussing his making a full-time job of looking after Gavin?'

'I rather doubt it. I think he'd say that working at the hospital

and in his spare time with the deaf-blind he's able to help a number of people. It wouldn't fit in with his ideas of service to look after just one person as a paid job.'

They stared at her and she smiled back at them.

'It's quite a thing with him,' she explained. 'You could ask him, of course, but I suggest you wait a week or two.'

She stubbed out her cigarette.

'I'm afraid I must go. I'm keeping an elderly couple waiting.'

'Both deaf-blind?' Vivien asked.

'The wife had a little sight when they first married, but it's been gone for years now.'

'Who looks after them?'

'They look after themselves. They're quite poor.'

'How on earth do they manage?'

Clare gathered up her gloves and handbag.

'Human nature is infinitely adaptable, you know,' she said with her charming smile.

Vivien rang for someone to show this extraordinary woman out.

'It's been good of you to spare us your time,' she murmured.

'We're very grateful,' Hayton supplemented.

'Not at all,' Clare cooed back, in support of the polite fiction that she had been helpful.

The Haytons did not see Laurence Oakes before he left. Both felt unequal to any more difficult conversation that evening.

THE Haytons waited a fortnight, during which time Laurence Oakes visited Gavin twice at the house for a Braille lesson and twice met him in Regent's Park on his half day from the hospital, making the arrangement with Helga by telephone, not wishing to go to the house more often than was necessary; it oppressed him as it did Gavin, and for the same reasons. At the end of this probationary period Hayton decided it was time to 'have a word with the young man'. It was agreed that nothing should be said to Gavin for fear of disappointment.

Laurence was waylaid by Helga as he was leaving Gavin's room, as Clare had been.

'The Boss wants to see you,' she said. She had picked up the expression from Gavin, who seldom referred to his stepfather in any other way. 'I am to take you to him,' she added.

Laurence frowned.

'His nibs will have to make it snappy. I've another engagement and am late already.' He hesitated, then said, 'You'd better tell him. Ask him if he can make it another evening. I'll wait here.'

Helga ambled off down the thickly carpeted corridor with its white and gold walls and Laurence gazed distractedly at some palette-knife splodges of paint on canvas surrounded by a massive gilt frame which hung over an ornate marble and gilt eighteenth-century table. These people had everything; they raped the centuries. What should the old bastard want to see him about? Just to ask him how his dear stepson was getting on with his Braille lessons. Nicely thank you.

Then Hayton, dinner-jacketed, cigar in hand, was padding down the stretch of grey carpet.

'Good evening, Mr. Oakes, I'm sorry you're in a hurry, but if you can spare just ten minutes, or less—'

'Less,' Laurence said, unsmiling.

Ignoring this Hayton opened a door beside the ormolu table and snapped on wall lights.

'Easier to talk here,' he explained.

The room was small and furnished in some sort as a library, with massive leather-bound volumes enclosed behind glass doors in tall bookcases. There was a long mahogany office-desk with an elaborate display of leather and silver writing paraphernalia. Laurence was fascinated by a huge glass and silver inkstand designed to hold a thimbleful of ink; you could use it as a door-stop, or to brain someone with, he reflected, and wondered what it weighed. Hayton seated himself in a swivel chair with brass studs behind the desk and indicated that the young man should seat himself in a leather armchair drawn up beside it, but Laurence remained standing, a dark, thickset, slightly truculent figure in a shabby raincoat.

'To come straight to the point, as you're in a hurry,' Hayton said, bluntly, 'would you consider making my stepson your full-time job?'

'No,' Laurence said.

As though he had not spoken Hayton steam-rolled on: 'Starting salary five hundred a year and your own place in the country. Poultry farm or anything you fancied. All running costs charged to me. All found, in fact.'

'Not my line,' Laurence said. 'Sorry!'

'Gavin has become extremely fond of you and such an arrangement would make a great deal of difference to his happiness.'

'At present I help a number of people. Why should I give them all up to concentrate on just one poor little rich boy?'

He turned to go.

Hayton rose from behind his desk, gesturing with his cigar.

'Just one moment. I thought you were fond of the boy?'

'I am. But there are others.'

He opened the door and Hayton followed him into the hall. He

was extremely angry, but flattered himself he was under control.

'Isn't one lad of Gavin's talent worth all the rest—a special case? Given the help he needs in his affliction he might one day become famous as a poet!'

'If he has the gift it will develop without any outside help. I'm sorry. I really must go. Good night.'

His hand was already on the front door.

'Sleep on it, anyhow,' Hayton said, and as the door slammed marched upstairs to where Vivien waited.

'Nothing doing,' he said, shortly. 'Infernally rude into the bargain. Can't devote himself exclusively to poor little rich boy, if you please.'

Vivien was aghast at such insolence.

'Is that what he said?'

'Yes, ma'am. That's what he had the gall to say! Bloody little Commie!'

'You think he's that?'

'Not far removed, anyhow.'

His hand was a little unsteady as he poured himself an outsize whisky.

'How awful! In that case we're just as well without his services. There must be more suitable people. He would only be a bad influence on Gavin.'

Hayton took a large mouthful of the neat whisky, clicked his tongue loudly against his palate as it went down, pulled again on his cigar, and began to feel calmer.

'Of course he may just be playing hard-to-get and come back next week and say he'll do it for seven-hundred-and-fifty a year. Something like that.'

'Supposing he does?'

Hayton shrugged.

'We haven't much choice, have we? I don't mean to be unkind, but we've got to be realistic. There's no life for the boy here, and if we get that place in Wiltshire he'd be more cut off there than here. He's taken to this feller—they can discuss the one thing he's interested in, poetry——'

'But if he's going to prove a bad influence——'

'Gavin can hardly be an active member of the Communist party, or any other, can he? Oakes probably isn't a party member—they all talk like that nowadays; it's all part of the ban-the-bomb nonsense and sucking up to Russia. It might be a good idea to tell Gavin what we plan—if you think you can make him understand, or get Helga to tell him—and let him try to get round Oakes.'

'But if he can't then the disappointment is so terrible!'

'When does Oakes come again?'

'Today week.'

'We could leave it till then. He may come up with an idea off his own bat then. Commonsense ought to tell him when he's on to a good thing.'

'Supposing it doesn't? I mean supposing he's really got ideals about service, like Mrs. Williams said—what then?'

'Perhaps she can find us someone less idealistic! But no point in crossing bridges till we come to 'em. We haven't finished with Oakes yet. Money's no object, and you know my philosophy—there's no problem that can't be solved by money, one way or another! Mr. Idealistic Oakes has probably got his price like everyone else. . . .'

Sitting under the trees facing the lake, in Regent's Park, a few days later Laurence told Gavin of his stepfather's proposal and of his rejection of it. He told him in the rapid manual shorthand they had evolved together, abbreviating and omitting words, using agreed signs for others, so that communication was almost as quick as normal speech.

Gavin said, 'I know it's selfish of me to want to take you away from all the people you help just for me, but all the same I wish you'd agree to the plan! It would be wonderful. I can't live the rest of my life like this, seeing you once or twice a week and living in that horrible house. Even when the old man's not smoking one of his filthy cigars I always know when he's there—when it's not the stink of cigars and whisky there's some kind of eau-de-cologne he uses. And I know when my mother's there because of that expensive-smelling scent. But it's more than that. I can *feel* them there, talking together, saying what they like about me knowing

I can't hear, staring at me knowing I can't see. Perhaps even talking when I'm talking, because I can't know! Sometimes I think I'll go mad. I think I'm alone in my room and then suddenly I know my mother's there—I feel her there long before she touches me to let me know. I don't mind Helga—she always lets me know at once, and I don't mind the kid—in fact I like him being there, because he climbs all over me and doesn't know I can't see him or hear him any more. I like putting my fingers on his face and feeling him laugh. But I've got a thing about my mother. I feel she doesn't want me any more—that I'm just a nuisance to her—'

Laurence was aware of the mounting hysteria and laid a hand on the boy's arm, then took his hand to tell him, 'You've no reason to think that.'

'I know I've no reason,' Gavin shouted, excitedly. 'Has everything got to be reasonable? There's feeling, isn't there?'

A pair of sauntering lovers, both of them in tight jeans, the girl with her hair piled up untidily in the current birds'-nest fashion, looked with interest at the man and boy sitting on the grass.

'He believes in making himself heard,' the young man observed. 'Nothing like telling the world!'

'He's blind,' the girl said. 'See the white stick? Must be one of those deaf-mutes you hear about.'

'Can't say he *sounds* very mute,' the young man said, and they both laughed.

Laurence glowered after them, resenting their happy insensitivity, then turned back to Gavin, who was fighting tears, and his fingers tightened for a moment on the boy's hand before he had them say, 'Feeling, intuition, yes. But your mother suffers. I am looking for a way to solve your problem unselfishly, without making you a special case.'

'Couldn't we live together somewhere and you still do your hospital work and your other work?'

'What I earn at the hospital wouldn't keep us both.'

'It wouldn't have to. If you don't want to take the Boss's money let him give it to me as an allowance, then we would each have our own money.'

'Could you bear to take his money?'

'Easily! He doesn't earn it.'

'All the same, better you should be self-supporting.'

'How can I ever be that?'

'Any number of people like you are. I know a young man not much older than you who earns his living correcting Braille proofs. You could do that, too. You might also sell occasional poems to magazines. Later on you might be able to bring out a collection of your poems in book form. Become known. Why not? Keller isn't the only deaf-blind writer by any means!'

'It would be wonderful, but it couldn't happen living as I am now. It's only Helga makes life bearable here, and she wants to go back to Germany at Christmas, for good. When you're like this you've got to be able to feel sure of people—that they won't leave you.' The anxiety always just below the surface since he became afflicted rose in him and began piling up. 'There has to be someone you can absolutely rely on,' he insisted.

'You have someone. You have me. For as long as you want.'

'Whatever happens?'

'Yes. But what could happen?'

'I don't know. You might want to go abroad. Or get married.'

'Both are quite unlikely.'

'You might die.'

'So might you!'

He touched the boy's face in their agreed laughter sign, but he himself was not smiling.

To his relief Gavin laughed, his anxiety dispelled.

'We can make it till death do us part, anyhow!'

Laurence gave the pressure of assent, then said, 'I'll try to work out something so that we can be together without my giving up everything else. Let's walk now.'

They scrambled to their feet and went down over the grass to the path beside the lake, walking in the direction of the bridge. Occasionally Laurence halted their walk to give Gavin the scene: ducks and drakes at the water's edge, a sailing-boat out, a bed of scarlet geraniums and heliotrope. They crossed the bridge and Gavin wanted to know if the border along the path had been planted out yet with dahlias. Laurence said yes, and that the lupins

were going over. They crossed the road and passed the open-air café and came to a border of huge blue and mauve and purple delphiniums.

Involuntarily Laurence exclaimed, 'I wish you could see them!' then on the boy's fingers told him about them.

They stood in front of the bed and Gavin reached out and touched one of the soft spikes.

He said, 'I remember how they used to be, and a verse I liked when I was a kid—

*'The dormouse said only
"I did like the view
Of geraniums red
And delphiniums blue."'*

They went on towards the Queen Mary Rose Garden, halting occasionally to inhale the scent of a bed of roses and for Laurence to retail the colour and the name. When they reached the rose-gardens they sat on a seat at the perimeter, where climber roses swung on thick ropes between concrete posts, garlanding the wide circle of beds massed with crimson, gold, coral, orange, roses of rich dark velvet, roses of pale delicate silks, roses that seemed made of the sun itself.

There was a commotion of thrush song close at hand and Laurence repressed an impulse to say, 'I wish you could hear!' and instead told Gavin, 'There are thrushes, still with the downy look of fledglings and singing like mad!'

Gavin felt the sun on his face and the scent of roses came to him and he saw them in his mind, and heard the repetitive song of the young thrushes. He had seen and heard it all many times and he saw and heard it all now very clearly.

He asked, 'Is there any Josephine Bruce this year? She's usually on the far side.'

They got up and went in search of this fabulous crimson velvet rose and found her in the expected place. They halted and drew in the scent and Gavin said, 'I'm sure this is the rose-of-all-the world!'

No point in being pedantic and telling him that it hadn't been

created when Yeats wrote that poem. Any more than in telling him that this year poor Josephine had quite a bad attack of mildew. A compensation of blind silence, Laurence thought wryly, was that you were spared the unnecessary particulars.

When they were not talking Laurence kept contact with Gavin through a hand on his arm, and with a light pressure guided him when necessary, and to the boy walking in darkness and silence the June day was alight and alive, filled, through their scent, with the luminous colours of the roses. He walked confidently, with Laurence's hand on his arm, lifted out of the depression of despair which so often engulfed him when alone, and filled with hope and courage.

Laurence looked at the eager young face bent over the bed of crimson roses and felt his heart contract with pity and pain. Whatever he might assert to the business-man stepfather, out of a complex antipathy, this boy *was* different, *was* a special case; because of his loneliness, his sensibility, his poetic gift, and the intensity of his need. There could be no deserting him. Whatever happens. It had to be. This boy needed him in a way that the others didn't; the others he helped and they were grateful to him but anyone else would do as well, anyone who was sympathetic, and a quick manual speaker; they didn't need him emotionally as this boy needed him. And Clare Williams was right; he in turn needed him.

But how did she know that? *What* did she know?

A small fear twisted in him. It might be a good thing to leave London. He could ask to be transferred, perhaps. To somewhere near the sea, as the boy had himself suggested. 'The beautiful, lapsing, unsoilable sea.' Well, why not?

A few days later when he was at the house Laurence asked if he might have a few minutes with Sir James after his hour with Gavin. Helga took the message and Hayton told her to bring Mr. Oakes up to the drawing-room, where he sat drinking after-dinner coffee and cognac with Vivien.

This time Laurence sat down and accepted a cigarette from Vivien, but declined the coffee and cognac Hayton offered.

'Have you decided you can help us with Gavin after all?' Vivien asked, smiling in an attempt to appear casual.

He told her, 'It's possible I could help, yes, but not on Sir James's terms.'

Hayton said quickly, 'We needn't quibble about money, you know. I told you last time—you can name your own terms.'

'It's not a question of money. I prefer to earn my living working in a hospital—for reasons of my own. I'm prepared to be a life-long companion to Gavin, or until he himself wants to change the arrangement, but not for a salary. Gavin will need an allowance from you until he is self-supporting—for a few years, that is to say, and we need a place to live, somewhere out of London. Devon, perhaps?'

'Why Devon?' Vivien asked.

'I could probably get transferred to one of the big hospitals there, and we'd both like to be by the sea. There's no reason why Gavin shouldn't at least go sailing again—riding, too, if he wants to. Swimming is out for him because of his ears.'

Hayton asked, 'How do you propose to look after him if you're away all day at a hospital?'

'He's not an invalid. He doesn't need someone with him all the time. Some of the deaf-blind people Mrs. Williams and I visit live alone and even go shopping. If we could have a little place with a big enough garden for raising vegetables and keeping hens Gavin would get fresh air and exercise—'

Vivien cut in, 'You're not suggesting he could do gardening?'

'Plenty of deaf-blind do.'

Hayton asked, 'Have you discussed all this with him?'

'Not in detail, but to some extent. It's what he wants.'

'Of course,' Vivien said, thoughtfully, 'if you were in Devon I could come for weekends sometimes, couldn't I?'

'Of course.'

She turned eagerly to Hayton.

'It really is quite an idea, don't you think, darling?'

'It has possibilities,' Hayton agreed.

He looked directly at Laurence.

'Supposing you suddenly decide to get married? Would you then want to end the arrangement?'

'I've promised Gavin that only death or his own wish can end it.'

'Have you got a girl friend?'

'No.'

'Don't you like women?' Hayton's tone was sharp.

'I'm not drawn to them—nor they to me. But don't let it worry you. It doesn't add up to homosexuality.'

'What does it add up to then?'

Laurence's mouth tightened.

'Isn't one's sex life a private matter?'

Hayton drew on his cigar, then withdrew it from his lips and sat regarding it. He said after a moment, 'I apologize. But you must realize that we know nothing about you, and that Gavin is very young. We naturally feel a great responsibility—'

'That we should live together was originally your idea,' Laurence pointed out. 'You knew even less about me then. You now at least know that if I look after Gavin it won't be for financial gain. I would even prefer to pay you rent for any place you get for us—at least enough to cover the rates.'

'That wouldn't be necessary. But what exactly *do* you expect to get out of the arrangement? Are we to believe it's sheer altruism on your part?'

'I'd like to be able to say it was, but I suspect it's the antithesis—sheer egoism.'

'I'm afraid I don't get you,' Hayton said, curtly. 'In any case,' he added, 'this doesn't get us any further on. You have your own motives which you don't choose to divulge, but if it works out all right for the boy—'

'That at least we can count on,' Laurence murmured.

'What do you propose, then, as a first step?'

'First I must get myself fixed up with a job at a hospital in a place where Gavin would be happy. Torquay might be an idea. There's a big general hospital there, and also a centre for the blind at which I might be able to be useful. Then if we could find a small place to live, a cottage or a bungalow, a few miles out, I could cycle to and fro.'

Hayton looked at Vivien.

'What do you feel about it?'

She replied, eagerly, 'I think it's a wonderful idea! I'm all for giving it a try, anyhow!'

'All right.' He poured himself more coffee and then addressed himself to Laurence. 'If you'll let me know as soon as you're fixed up with a job where you want to be we can then go into action over finding a suitable place to live. O.K.?'

'O.K.' Laurence got up. 'I told Gavin I'd let him know how my talk with you went. If I could see him before I go——'

Vivien said quickly, 'Yes, of course. I'll come with you. Only you talk for me—I'm so slow and clumsy and it irritates him. I can't use the finger-alphabet at all, I'm afraid.'

'It's only a matter of practice. But I'll help you. Just watch my hands and copy it on Gavin's.'

'What shall I say to him? I feel so nervous with him since all this happened. I long to talk to him, but it's all so frustrating. I mean the simplest thing takes such a time, spelling it all out letter by letter like that. At times I feel quite neurotic about it!'

He opened the door for her and when it had closed on them both she asked, 'Do other mothers of afflicted children get like this? Am I abnormal?'

'No two people are alike,' he told her. 'The strain on the mothers is always heavy. The mothers and the wives. Naturally the more nervous types feel it most.'

Actually his experience of women in such cases was that they rose quite heroically to meet the changed circumstances, finding ways to communicate and refusing to be defeated by the difficulties, but this woman was obviously in a bad nervous state and if a good deal of her suffering was self-pity nevertheless she suffered. He had the feeling that she could never have been very close to her son even before this had happened.

Vivien never got used to entering Gavin's room without his awareness of her presence, particularly when he appeared to be looking directly at her with his clear blue eyes. He was poring over sheets of Braille when they entered, frowning with the effort of concentration. The open window framed an evening sky full of

soft gold light, the after-glow of the lovely day; but the day's sunshine had not entered that small back room and it struck cold on entering. It simply had not occurred to Vivien in allocating this room to Gavin that because he could no longer see sunshine was all the more reason for him to feel it. Or that he would know exactly what sort of room it was.

Laurence went over to the boy, touching his shoulder in the familiar way, then took his hand to tell him, 'The Boss says O.K. and your mother is delighted. She is here now and wants to say something. Be patient with her.'

He then gave Gavin's hand into Vivien's.

Gavin cried, excitedly. 'You mean we're to live by the sea—the two of us, like we planned?'

'You tell him,' Laurence urged Vivien.

She looked at him in dismay.

'I can't——'

'Yes you can! Tell him yes, a house by the sea, and that you'll come and visit us. O.K.? Then look—watch me and do the same on his hand. It's quite easy. I won't go fast.'

Copying Laurence she wrote the message on Gavin's hand.

'I thought you couldn't speak this way?' Gavin said.

Laurence tried to make her continue, but she pleaded, 'You take over—tell him you're teaching me and that by the time I come to visit you in Devon I'll be as quick as you are.'

'You can only become that by practising,' Laurence pointed out, but he took Gavin's hand and said on his fingers what she had asked him to say.

She added, 'Tell him I'm going now but will come and say good night later on. I'll say good night to you now—I'm sure he'd sooner have you to himself.'

'I have to go in a few minutes. Won't you come back and practise talking with him when I'm gone? He would appreciate it, I'm sure.'

'It's no good. I only irritate him. I'll send the German girl to him—she's quick and they get on together.'

She left the room, leaving behind her a trail of the sophisticated perfume Gavin hated. Laurence went back to Gavin.

'Your mother has gone,' he told him, 'and I must go, too. Your mother is sending Helga to you.'

'Tell her not to. I want to be alone when you've gone, remembering everything. It was wonderful in the rose-garden! I was thinking perhaps we could grow roses in our garden in Devon—Josephine Bruce, and dear old Hector Deane who goes on and on, and Crimson Glory round the door!'

'It sounds wonderful!'

Gavin laughed, excitedly.

'You're glad about it all, aren't you?'

Laurence touched the boy's face in the laughter sign and this time he was smiling himself.

'As glad as you are,' he assured him, then aloud, relinquishing the listening fingers, 'It might solve things for me, too!'

WHAT Hayton invariably referred to as Operation Devon proceeded according to plan; Laurence got himself the hoped-for hospital job, and immediately he reported this Hayton's secretary went into action over finding a suitable house, and after a number of unsuitables the house-agents came up with a hill-top house overlooking the Teign estuary. The owner wanted to let furnished for a year and at the end of the year might renew the lease; he was going to Australia following his wife's death and if he prospered there and liked the life might stay for some years, or for ever. The house stood in its own grounds and the nearest neighbour was a quarter of a mile down the hill in one direction and a mile down the hill in the other; it looked one way out across the estuary to Teignmouth and the coast beyond, and the other way up the estuary to the heights of Dartmoor. It was, as the agents declared, ideally situated for anyone who appreciated scenery and liked seclusion. The house was furnished in simple good taste, and the owner's sailing-dinghy, tied up on the Shaldon side of the estuary, was at the tenant's disposal. The owner was asking ten guineas a week, which the agents declared was giving it away, but which Laurence thought fabulous.

He went down by train with Gavin and Vivien to inspect it and it was agreed that it was 'ideal'. Vivien thought suddenly that Terry would have loved it, and longed for Gavin to be able to see it. She had spasms of a wild despairing grief over her son, and this was one of them. She had also moments of illumination in which she saw her life as the fourth Lady Hayton as preposterous and unreal, wholly unnatural. Standing in the garden above the Teign valley and looking out across the estuary to the open sea and the

long lovely cliff line of the coast she had a wave of longing for Terry to be alive and coming back from some Far Eastern assignment to live there with her and Gavin—Gavin as he was before the meningitis struck.

She turned to Laurence in the sudden anguished desire to express something of this, but he was busy talking to Gavin. He was describing to him the valley, the estuary, the coast-line, and how they stood in the garden high above it all, facing out to sea which sparkled in the sunshine. The garden sloped gently down to a small orchard, he told him, and beyond that was a big cornfield, and beyond that more fields, descending in squares of red and green to the village and the water. Across the estuary there were gentle slopes with fields and trees climbing up to moorland, and away to the west Dartmoor. There were no houses near, and the narrow lane that led up to the house and then deepened steeply down the other side was flanked by high banks and hedges.

'We can be happy here,' he concluded.

Gavin smiled. 'I feel the sea on my face,' he said, 'I can see it all.'

Vivien's eyes filled with tears.

'I can't bear it for him!' she cried.

Laurence assured her, quietly, firmly, 'He does see it all, you know. He *feels* it!'

'He can't see how blue the sea is and how red the Devon earth is!'

'Not with his eyes, but with his mind he does see it.'

He took Gavin's hand and led him to the wall of the house and placed his hand on a trellis on which a honeysuckle climbed. Gavin moved his hand over the trellis and touched leaves and flowers and pulled a blossom close, then smiled.

'Honeysuckle! Anything else? Any roses?'

'An old-fashioned pink climber by the front door,' Laurence told him. 'And a conservatory with a grape vine. We can grow tomatoes in there! Come!'

They went into the house and Laurence described the rooms to Gavin: a large living-room with windows in two walls and opening into the conservatory; a kitchen whose window looked across the garden to Dartmoor; upstairs a large bedroom with two windows

looking one way across the valley the other out to sea, 'Your room,' Laurence told him, 'and next door a little room for me, and in a corner another little room for when your mother comes to stay.'

He turned to Vivien. 'I've told him there's a room for you here. You must come often and learn to talk to him on his fingers.'

Vivien smiled ruefully. 'He won't want it. He just wants to be alone with you. I don't blame him. You can talk to him and I can't.'

'You can learn.'

'I don't think so. I'm too self-conscious. I might have learned if it had been Terry—my husband. But not with Gavin. He's too impatient with me. He never did have much use for me.'

Gavin was asking, 'Are there any birds here?'

'Oyster-catchers and gulls,' Laurence told him. 'At the moment there's a blackbird singing fit to burst in an ash tree that leans out over the lane from the garden hedge.'

'Take me to it.'

Laurence took him across the grass to the ash tree and placed his hands on the slender trunk. The boy rested his face against the trunk and smiled.

'It's long grass just here, isn't it?'

'Yes. Bluebells here in the spring. Primroses on the bank.'

They toured the garden and when they finally went back to the waiting taxi Laurence said to Vivien, 'It's all wonderful, but it seems terrible it has to cost so much!'

'It's nothing to Sir James—he spends that much a week on whisky and cigars.' There was an edge of bitterness to her voice that was not lost on him.

She had earned not much more as his secretary. Money was nothing to him because he had always had it; his imagination could not grasp poverty—what it meant to live on, to keep yourself and a child for a week on, including the rent, the price of five bottles of whisky. He was magnanimous, when it suited him to be, because he got a kick out of it, a feeling of power, and he was mean without realizing it from lack of imagination. He thought the rent of this house cheap, and would have paid twice as much, she knew,

to get Gavin out of the way. She thought: Since Terry died I have everything and nothing—not even my son.

Hayton was delighted that the house had proved suitable; he had his secretary instruct his solicitors to go ahead and ‘finalize’ the arrangements for the year’s lease, on the understanding that if at the end of the year the owner wished to renew the lease they should have the first offer.

Matters went expeditiously, and within a month Gavin and Laurence had moved in, and a new phase began.

AT FIRST the new occupants of Redlands, as the hill-top house was—rather obviously—called, had a succession of visitors. Laurence dealt with them all very briefly; each was thanked for calling and was told that the difficulties were too great for social intercourse. Those who called when Laurence was away at work had the satisfaction of seeing the deaf-blind boy in the garden but having satisfied their curiosity retreated before the impossibility of communicating with him. Those who met Laurence left within a few minutes feeling snubbed, as he intended. He described them to Gavin: progressive parson, believes in taking the gospels into the pub, religion made palatable for country yokel and retired colonel alike; the retired colonel in person, inviting us both for a chota-peg any evening; told him you weren't old enough and that I was a total abstainer. Well-bred wife of the inevitable gentleman farmer; would like to arrange a tea-party so that we can meet some of the best local people—seemed to think the fact that most of them were Londoners a point in their favour; thanked her but said it would never do; she left discomfited; the wife of an antique dealer, two spinster ladies who run a teashop, an earnest young man who runs some kind of club and thought he might rope us in, especially for the Saturday night folk dancing; said we would then meet the real people not the retired middle classes who had descended on the place since the war.

Laurence was impatient of the callers; they represented a social convention he despised, and he derived a certain wry satisfaction in getting rid of them, but their calling worried Gavin, who never felt safe from intrusion on his privacy. Several times he had been aware of some presence in the garden, and the thought of these

strangers whom he could neither see nor hear watching him filled him with horror. It was therefore agreed that a strong new lock should be put on to the high wooden gates that opened into the lane and that Laurence would lock them when he left for work. Now that they no longer had a woman coming up to clean for them three times a week this would present no problem. The woman had left after only a few weeks because it got on her nerves, she declared, working in a house with someone who could neither see nor hear her, but who sometimes seemed to know when she was in the same room and would speak to her, which worried her because she couldn't reply.

Her presence got on Gavin's nerves in the same way that the callers had, and his mother's guests at the Regent's Park house, and the daily woman; Helga's had been the only presence he could tolerate, because she always made it known to him by touch, and because she could communicate with him. But he didn't wish for Helga to come and live with them at Redlands; he wanted that they should be alone, and assured Laurence that he was quite capable of making his own bed, washing dishes, getting his midday meal. Laurence was well aware of the extent to which deaf-blind people were capable of looking after themselves; he had only wondered whether even with sight and hearing Gavin would be able to, and when the boy demonstrated that he could Laurence readily agreed to dispense with domestic help. He, no less than Gavin, wanted that they should be alone together. As alone as Vivien, with her occasional duty visits and her frequent telephone calls from London would allow them to be.

Vivien made three visits in the first three months and then gave up, and her telephone calls came at intervals of weeks. The visits satisfied nothing except her conscience, for she remained incapable of satisfactory communication with Gavin and felt him remote from her. To Laurence she sometimes felt herself tentatively drawn, but although he sometimes seemed sympathetic to her difficulties over Gavin he was for the most part silent and withdrawn . . . and never more so than when she made diffident efforts to find out something about his background—where was he born, were his parents still alive. He replied tersely that he was born in

London and had never known his parents, then asked to be excused and left the room. She confided biographical details about herself to him in the hope of receiving return confidences. She told him how she had emigrated to Australia with her parents when she was fifteen and had 'come home' when she was twenty intending it to be for only a year, but had met Terence Edwards when she had gone ashore with some fellow passengers at Singapore, where he was on a job; one of them knew him and had looked him up. They had met again in London and it had led to marriage, and she had never gone back to Australia. Her parents had never seen Gavin, because they had never come home, and with Terry it somehow never seemed possible to raise the fare. Now that money was no longer a problem it was of course too late. Wasn't that life all over?

Laurence let her rattle on, made no comment and asked no questions, and sometimes cut her short to escape from her. He considered her pathetic, but a bore. He wondered how Terence Edwards, who seemed to have been intelligent, could have tolerated her; perhaps by being away a good deal. And she was, of course, pretty, in a woman's-magazine-cover kind of way, if you liked them like that, which he supposed more men than not did. There were nurses at the hospital like that, and his male colleagues obviously found them quite disturbingly attractive. He found them repellent, and never more so than when they showed signs of being attracted by him; then he found them horrifying.

Only women like Clare Williams were tolerable; quiet women, a little withdrawn, cool, neat women whose femininity did not obtrude. For Clare he felt respect and admiration, which added up to something near to affection. With her it was possible to forget that she was female. But since she had brought him to Gavin he felt uneasy with her, disconcerted by her apparent recognition of his needs, and wondering what she knew of his history. From the age of sixteen he had consorted with prostitutes, at one period a good deal, women who asked no questions, were not interested in him as a person, and whom he was free to despise. Then suddenly he turned against the whole business and entered on a phase of bitter, angry, misogynic celibacy.

He wondered, sometimes, about Gavin. But Gavin, it seemed to

him, at sixteen was not ready for sex; he was too busy adjusting himself to the world of darkness and silence into which he had been plunged, and with the fantasy world he created through poetry. For at Redlands he was beginning to write seriously; the poetic outpouring at the sanatorium had been purely emotional, an adolescent urge to self-expression; now the technique of poetry in its various forms began to interest him and he began to experiment.

Now *The Habit of Perfection* had a personal significance for him, new meaning. His was not an elected silence but it did sing for him through the remembered music of the dead Jesuit poet; it did pipe him to pastures still, and it was the music that he cared to hear. The curfew had shut out the external world, shelling his eyes with 'double dark', and the 'uncreated light' was the only light he knew, but there was a blazing sun of light to be created out of darkness, a wild music out of silence. The darkness and silence of his world was radiant with this light, with this strange sweet singing.

He wrote a few small pieces under this influence, filled with nostalgia for the cry of an owl in the night's dark silence, for the silver gleam of the sea along the night-dark shore, but filled also with the authentic poetic vision challenging the curfew rung down on active life.

At Laurence's suggestion he sent three of his poems in the Hopkins manner to one of the literary Sunday newspapers, and three to one of the literary weeklies. He had not dared to hope that more than one of each batch would be accepted, if that; to his astonishment all were accepted, and in each case the editor expressed interest in seeing more of Mr. Edwards's work. Gavin had decided that any literary success he might have would be credited to him as Gavin Edwards. He was determined that when he was twenty-one he would change his name by deed poll back to Edwards. Laurence said that if he made a name for himself as Edwards this wouldn't be necessary, but Gavin insisted that it was necessary to him because he felt it to be; why should he have his mother's husband's name tacked on to him for the rest of his life?

When the first poem appeared, a few months after the move to Devon, Vivien had her attention called to it by Clare Williams, who made it an excuse for telephoning, ostensibly to congratulate her.

'Such a beautiful poem! You must feel very proud!'

Vivien had not seen the poem, because although the paper in which it appeared was one of the several Sunday papers delivered regularly to the house it was not one she ever looked at. She told Clare that she 'must have missed it'. She was excited and pleased by the news. 'His father would have been pleased,' she said.

Clare manoeuvred the conversation round to where she wanted it. She asked Vivien if she had seen Gavin recently, although she knew from Laurence that she hadn't.

'I've more or less given up going,' Vivien admitted. 'It seems so pointless, since we can't talk to each other. He doesn't like my writing into his hand, and it's so slow anyway, and I've never been able to manage the finger-alphabet.'

Clare, to whom this was not news, then told her about a machine which enabled people who didn't know the hand language, or couldn't use it satisfactorily, to talk to the deaf-blind.

'You type what you want to say and it comes up on a Braille tape for the person you're talking to. Even people who have never learned to type can tap out messages on it, but for anyone who can type it's of course easier still, as it's a standard typewriter keyboard. If Gavin had such a machine you would have no conversation difficulties, and in time it would be useful to him to use with other people.'

Vivien was eagerly interested in the idea. 'I can type,' she confided. 'I used to be considered a very quick typist in my secretarial days. Typing what I want to say will be almost as quick as talking!'

'It isn't quite like that, I'm afraid,' Clare told her. 'It's a typewriter keyboard but the action is different—the keys have to punch the Braille dots—'

'Anyhow it's a wonderful idea. Why didn't you tell me about it ages ago?'

'I didn't realize the difficulties you were having. When Laurence told me I felt so sorry I hadn't thought to ask you how you were managing and to tell you about the Arcaid.'

She went on to explain that the A.R.C. represented the initials of its inventor, and that the machines were not a commercial enterprise; a trust fund had been formed to enable them to be

supplied for fifty pounds, which was about half the cost of their production, to people needing them. Vivien said, when she had written down the address, 'I'm sure Laurence thinks me terribly stupid not being able to cope with the finger-alphabet!'

'Not at all. People are different. The thing is to find the quickest and easiest means of communication, and for you this obviously is.'

Vivien's first reaction of pride that Gavin had broken into print gave place to resentment when she read the poem and saw that he had reverted to his father's name in connection with it. She felt that it implied some criticism of her marriage and of her having had Gavin's name changed to Hayton; she saw it as a gesture of defiance. The poem itself meant very little to her. It meant even less to James. He thought it good that the boy had made his literary debut, as he put it, in a good newspaper, and wondered what he would be paid for it. As for the boy writing under his own name, why not? Hayton was not after all his name and Vivien was a fool if she expected the boy to like being called by it. He approved the idea of the machine; he wouldn't mind having a bash at talking to the boy himself on it if he thought it would give him any pleasure—which he supposed it wouldn't.

Gavin received the news about the Arcaid with mixed feelings. It was a wonderful idea all right, and would be fine later on, when he was quicker at Braille; then when he and Laurence went to the Villa Napoli for a holiday, as they hoped to next summer, Maureen and his grandparents and all the others would be able to talk to him; for that reason alone he would be glad to have it; not for the reason his mother had got it for him—so that she could talk to him. It meant that she would visit them oftener now, probably regularly, and did he really want her tapping out nothings to him, her fingers stabbing at the keys? Slim fingers with pointed painted nails; he could see them very clearly in his mind.

Laurence asked him, 'Did you always dislike your mother so much?'

The question irritated him, because he never acknowledged to himself that he disliked her, and when he was irritated he forgot about voice-control.

'I don't dislike her,' he shouted. 'She's all right, I suppose, but we've got nothing to say to each other. We never did have much but since my illness there seems nothing at all. I don't know why Mrs. Williams put her on to this Arcad idea.'

'She felt sorry for your mother. So did I. She loves you.'

'Not since my illness she doesn't. I became an embarrassment to her.'

'You're not quite fair to her. It's not been easy for her.'

'Has it been for me?'

'I thought you hated pity.'

Laurence took his hand away and Gavin felt the movement of him getting up and sensed his impatience.

'Don't go,' he said. 'Don't be cross.'

But no hand answered him, no movement or gesture, and he knew himself alone. Laurence would never not answer if he were within hearing.

Within hearing. Even if you couldn't see, just to be within hearing of someone. Before his illness he had always thought that to be blind must be the most terrible thing that could happen to you. Now it seemed to him comparatively little, so long as you could hear, for you were left with contact with the external world; you weren't sealed off. It was that sense of being completely sealed off which could be so terrible. It was only bearable when the one person you cared about and relied on stayed close to you.

'Laurie!' he shouted, wildly, 'Laurie! Where are you? Come back! Laurie!'

He felt the familiar touch on his shoulder as he uttered the last cry and clung sobbing hysterically to that one person.

It was the first outburst of its kind and it worried Laurence. Until then he had believed that the inner tensions found release in the occasional irritabilities; it was the first indication that there was emotional as well as nervous tension. He realized that even without his double affliction there would be a degree of tension in Gavin where his mother was concerned because of her second marriage; his feeling that his affliction was an embarrassment to her aggravated it. And the machine which would make communication easier wouldn't help—because there was so little

to communicate; the mother would still be inadequate and the son impatient. And resentful. The machine could not dispose of the deep resentment at the heart of Gavin's intolerance of his mother; his resentment of her marriage to Hayton, his resentment of her changing his name to the one she acquired by this marriage, his resentment of her inadequacy, his resentment of Hayton himself. It would all be there even without the darkness and silence in which Gavin was condemned to live, but in that darkness and silence the tensions built up more powerfully.

Leaving the darkness and silence out of it, it was the Hamlet story. And the Hamlet story was a lot older than Shakespeare, and the mute, inglorious Hamlets suffered no less than the Prince of Denmark.

Perhaps the hill-top Devon house was not such a good idea after all. It was remote, but not remote enough—particularly if Gavin was now to be subjected to frequent visits from his mother. What would she find to say to him on the Arcaid that she did not say, pointlessly, week after week, in her affectionate, futile letters? The letters, in fact, served her better, for they could at least convey her anxious, frustrated love; the machine could never do that for her. Did she, he wondered, visualize herself sitting with Gavin and the Arcaid all day long and Gavin chatting to her, hour after hour, and herself brightly replying on the machine? Even with sight and hearing Gavin found it a strain—or as he called it a bore—being with his mother for very long at a time. Perhaps it was the tragedy of most mothers that sooner or later they bored or irritated their children, or both. There were the great devotions, to be sure, the sons who adored their mothers to the grave's edge, the daughters who adored their fathers, finding no fault in them, all with a kind of sublimated incestuousness—the Oedipus complex, in Freudian jargon. But there were demonstrably more of the bored and irritated.

And plenty, like himself, who hated one parent or both. He had no father to hate, his mother having no idea who was the father of her child, but his hatred for his mother, rooted in disgust and contempt, was something he tried not to think about. They were fortunate who were only bored with or indifferent to their

mothers. Gavin, he suspected, had some frustrated affection for his pretty, girlish, inadequate mother, and when he was older he might surrender his ego to it; but for the present, young, resentful, egoistic, he felt himself remote from her, and as impatient of her love as of her self-pity.

She wrote eagerly to Gavin of the wonderful machine Mrs. Williams had told her about, and of the lovely chats they would be able to have by means of it. She had ordered one for him, she told him, and it should reach him for his seventeenth birthday; she would come and spend a day or two then and they would celebrate. The machine wasn't to be his birthday present, of course, that would seem all wrong; she had a lovely present for him, something personal, which she hoped he would like. . . .

She came by train, and alone, and Laurence met her at the station. It was a crisp, sunny autumn day, not cold enough for the mink she wore over her suit but wearing it was one of her greatest pleasures in life. In the old hard-up days with Terence she used to say she would rather have the money than a mink coat; that bleak attitude no longer applied, since she now had all the money she wanted and mink as well. Terry, she supposed, wouldn't have approved; he would have taken a moral line about spending two thousand guineas on a coat when people were starving. She had never been able to follow such arguments or adopt such high ethical attitudes. She had never dared hope to own a mink coat, and now she owned one and she was glad. There was nothing in the world so soft and beautiful and satisfying; or so becoming.

She tripped down the platform on pencil heels, in the wake of a porter carrying her white leather suitcase. Laurence saw her from some distance away and thought she looked like a film star—the glamorous regulation Hollywood model. She was too insignificant for beauty, but she was, he was bound to admit, very pretty, in her blonde, heavily made-up way. It was not a hard prettiness, for there was a singular sweetness in her smile, and she had good eyes. She did not in the very least attract him, but also she did not repel him; he even, at times, felt her sympathetic—and felt sympathy for her.

The smile with which she greeted him was radiant. Her happiness was manifest. She was wearing mink and going to see her son,

and there was the wonderful new toy she had organized and which would enable them to speak together; it was his birthday and she had a handsome pure silk dressing-gown for him. The fact that she had bought it at an expensive Bond Street shop and that it was packed in tissue paper in an elegant box afforded her keen pleasure.

When they were settled in the taxi Laurence had ordered he told her that the machine had arrived the day before. She asked, eagerly, if Gavin was pleased with it, and that she was coming.

'Why, naturally,' he said.

Gavin had in fact said that he wished it was Maureen and his grandmother who were coming and had inquired anxiously how long his mother would be staying. He was curious about and excited by the machine only because of the possibilities it presented for the visit to Ireland next year.

'Be nice to your mother,' Laurence had urged.

'Yes, teacher,' Gavin had said, and grinned.

He was in a light-hearted mood, happy because the publication of his poems in the last few weeks had brought him several letters of praise, excited about the possibilities of the machine, and delighted with Laurence's birthday present—which was a fluffy female kitten which had looked at him with blue eyes from the window of a Torquay pet shop and demanded to be rescued by being bought. Gavin had always liked cats but he had never been allowed to own one as his mother disliked them. He had never been able to pass a cat without stopping to stroke it and talk to it. He had wanted a cat as soon as they had moved into Redlands but Laurence had protested that it would be a nuisance to them when they wanted to go to Ireland, or even to London for a day or two. But he had a soft spot for the creatures himself, and when the blue-eyed kitten had looked at him, beseechingly, through the shop window, its head on one side, he had weakened. He had brought it home in a bag hung from the handlebars of his bicycle and when he had put it into Gavin's hands the blaze of happiness in the boy's face melted all the difficulties of having not merely a cat but a female one at that. The kitten had climbed on to Gavin's shoulder and nuzzled its tiny head into his neck. Laurence told him its sex and asked what should they call her.

'Minnaloushe,' Gavin replied, promptly.

Laurence reminded him that the cat of Yeats's poem was male.

'It's all right,' Gavin cried. 'We can always call her Minna.'

When Laurence arrived at the house with Vivien they found the boy sitting outside the house in a sun-trap corner with the kitten asleep in his lap. He sat lightly stroking the tiny creature, his face lifted to the sun, his expression one of serene happiness.

'Oh, he has a kitten in his lap!' Vivien exclaimed, dismayed, as they approached the corner where Gavin sat.

'It's my birthday present to him,' Laurence explained.

Vivien regarded him with distress. 'I'm allergic to cats,' she told him. 'They give me asthma! Whatever are we going to do?'

'Such a very little cat as that won't give you asthma,' he suggested. 'Not,' he added, smiling, 'unless you make up your mind it's going to!'

'I daren't risk it,' she protested. 'Couldn't you just take the kitten from him and put it in another room whilst I'm here?'

'He'll be terribly disappointed, but I'll see what I can do. Let's just go into the house and I'll take your suitcase up to your room and bring you a drink to be going on with whilst the kettle's boiling. I expect you'd like a cup of tea? What would you like now—sherry or gin? Both got in specially for you!'

'Gin, please, and I'd love a cup of tea. We'll drink champagne tonight for Gavin's birthday, and to inaugurate the machine. I've brought a magnum—it's why the case is so heavy.'

'You don't really think we three are going to drink a magnum in one sitting, do you?'

'Well, we can't do it in two! You can't cork champagne up again—that's the beauty of it. And don't tell me you'd just as soon have cider!'

'I've never had either, so I wouldn't know! I'll go and get your gin. What would you like with it? Gavin seemed to think it was tonic water. I got some in but I also got some lime juice—in case.'

'Gavin was right. Fancy him remembering! He really is rather sweet. It's going to be such fun to be able to talk together properly again!'

Was it? Laurence wondered as he went off down the stairs to

fetch the guest her drink. Were incompatibles to be made compatible through a machine?

When he took the drink to her room Vivien had taken off her hat and coat and was leaning out of the window and looking immediately down on to Gavin.

She turned back into the room as Laurence entered, her face clouded.

'Seventeen years ago today,' she said, taking the glass from him. 'I was so happy when they told me the baby was a boy. And he grew up to be so attractive—and gifted. Then to think this had to happen. Sometimes when I look at him I can hardly bear it.'

Laurence said, brusquely, 'Anyone would sympathize, but it just is no good thinking along those lines. Come downstairs when you're ready. I'll go and retrieve the kitten.'

'I'll come now, or I might be tempted to watch Gavin's reaction from the window, and that wouldn't be fair.'

He stood aside for her to go ahead of him down the stairs and when she had settled herself in the living-room he went out to Gavin and laid a hand on his shoulder with the familiar touch, then took the boy's hand and told him, 'Your mother is in the sitting-room. I'll take Minna to your room. Your mother is afraid of asthma.'

'My mother doesn't suffer from asthma and what has Minna got to do with it?'

'Cats give some people asthma. Your mother doesn't like them anyway and it's not worth arguing about. We all have our little fads and this is your mother's.'

He put his hand on the kitten and Gavin offered no resistance, but he said, bitterly, 'My mother always did spoil everything!'

Laurence touched the boy's cheek in the familiar gesture of affection, then wrote rapidly on his hand, 'Forget about it. Let's go indoors and try out the machine. Your mother is longing to.'

They went into the house. Laurence took the kitten up to Gavin's room and placed it on the bed; when he went down to the living-room he found mother and son seated at a table but nothing was happening; Vivien's hands rested motionless on the

small keyboard of the machine and Gavin sat staring across at her, frowning slightly.

'How are you getting on?' Laurence inquired.

Vivien laughed, ruefully.

'We seem to have dried up. I've tapped out many happy returns and he has asked me if I had a comfortable journey and what the weather was like in London and whether I had lunch on the train, and I've answered all this and now we can neither of us think what to say!'

'That's all right. No one wants to talk all the time. You don't have to make conversation just because you have the means to. The point is he gets it all right on the tape?'

'Oh yes, but it's all so laborious. It's not like an ordinary typewriter. You can't go fast on it. Mrs. Williams did warn me, but I hadn't realized. I'm disappointed, really.'

'I'm sorry, but you shouldn't be. The machine does enable you to communicate with Gavin—a great deal less laboriously than block capitals in the palm of his hand. For anyone who can't cope with the manual it's a godsend. But of course no form of communication for the deaf-blind can ever be as fast as the hand-language, or as satisfactory for the person talked to. A machine can never be a satisfactory substitute for the human touch. But it can be a valuable expedient.'

He took Gavin's hand.

'Find something to say to your mother whilst I make tea. Tell her you're pleased with the machine—that it's a help.'

He smiled encouragingly at Vivien as he went out to the kitchen. 'Have another go,' he urged.

But she already had an inspiration. She touched Gavin, then wrote, 'I've a birthday present for you. I hope you like it. I'll go and fetch it.'

That gave her an excuse to leave the room. She was ashamed of her dread of being left alone with Gavin but was unable to overcome it. The machine helped, she acknowledged; it helped enormously, but she could not overcome her self-consciousness, her feeling of being unable to cope, of her utter inadequacy.

In her room she picked up the box containing the dressing-

gown from the bed but waited, listening for Laurence to come out of the kitchen and go into the living-room before venturing downstairs. It was awful to be like this, she thought wretchedly. Other women probably coped marvellously, mothers with their sons, wives with their husbands, learned the hand-language in no time and managed to speak quickly by it, and were models of patience and devotion. If it were Terry perhaps she, too, could cope; Terry had always been so easy to talk to, and Gavin never had been; and now that everything was so difficult he unnerved her altogether. If there was something you very much wanted to say to a person no doubt you found a way to say it, whatever the difficulties; the trouble was there was nothing she very much wanted to say to her son—except to explain to him why it was all so difficult for her, which of course was out of the question.

Whilst she waited in her room, the door open, listening, she heard someone coming upstairs and after a moment knew by a certain cautiousness in the tread that it was Gavin. She went to the door and watched him. It was like watching a sleep-walker, she thought pityingly, but also a little fearfully. She retreated into the room as he passed her door to go into his room, the door at right-angles to hers. He slammed the door behind him and then she heard him calling the kitten.

'Minna-Minna-Minna! Where are you? Ah, there you are, you little thing! Why should you be shut in here all alone just because her ladyship fancies herself allergic to cats? . . . You're so sweet! I wish I could see you! Laurie says you've got a tiny white fichu under your chin. I've a good mind to take you downstairs and see what happens. Perhaps you'd drive the visitor back to town. Then we can enjoy ourselves!'

Vivien closed the door of her room. She felt herself go white with anger and pain. She threw the box she had been clutching on to the bed, then looked at herself in the mirror. Yes, she had gone quite white. It afforded her satisfaction. Laurence would see for himself how she suffered. She began feverishly pushing back into her suitcase the things she had recently taken from it. A wave of misery engulfed her and she began to sob.

In the midst of it Laurence came upstairs to tell her tea was

ready. He knocked on the door and she immediately flung it open, presenting herself to his astonished gaze dressed for departure, suitcase in hand, and in tears.

'I'm going back to town!' she cried, wildly. 'Gavin's longing for it—so that he can play with that horrible kitten and you can all be happy together! Please ring for a taxi to take me to the station.'

'What is all this about? You've only just come!'

'I shouldn't have come at all!'

She gasped and began to sob again.

'Oh, please!' Laurence pleaded. 'Please come downstairs and have a cup of tea and let's discuss things. Gavin can stay in his room. Please!'

He took the suitcase from her and put it down, then laid a hand on her arm.

'Come and have the tea, then if you insist on going I'll ring for a taxi.'

She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes, careful not to smear the mascara.

'I'm a fool, I know, but I was so pleased about coming and thinking Gavin would be pleased with the machine and enjoy having some conversation with me, but you can see for yourself he's not interested—he'd rather sit in his room and play with the kitten! He told the creature he would bring it downstairs then perhaps I would go back to town. What's the good of my staying when he feels like that?'

Laurence said only, 'Come!' and they went downstairs and into the living-room. He poured tea for Vivien. She sipped it perched on the arm of the settee and still wearing her coat.

After a moment Laurence said, 'Gavin's emotionally immature. You have to make allowances. This thing happened to him at a critical time. Braille is still laborious for him and he's terribly frustrated. It'll be easier for him when he can read.'

'He read what came up on the tape when I used the machine.'

'That was easy for him, but he wants to be able to read quickly, and to read poetry, and he can't yet. There's a poet he has a passion for and all he can have of him at present is what he learned by heart before all this happened.'

'There are more important things in life than poetry. You think he'd be glad of love and affection——'

'I don't think all that is very important to him just now. He needs to feel there's someone he can depend on, to be his eyes and ears, and he's got that in me. He's emotionally arrested.'

'It's too awful.'

'It has to be accepted. May I fill your cup?'

'No thank you. I must go. There's no point in my staying. I'll never come again. Not unless Gavin asks me to.'

She put down her cup, opened her handbag and took out a powder compact and began repairing the tear-ravaged makeup.

Please ring for a taxi,' she said. 'There's a train about four.'

Laurence got up.

'Perhaps you're right.'

He went outside and she heard him telephoning. He went upstairs for her suitcase and when he came back into the room she said, 'Just tell Gavin I decided after all to get the afternoon train back to town and that I couldn't come and say goodbye as he was playing with the kitten and it would have started me coughing.'

'I'll tell him.'

'He'll be delighted.'

Laurence made no comment and she said, 'Let's wait outside till the taxi comes.'

They went out into the garden and paced the lawn, and Vivien, now fully composed, made little remarks about the view, the late roses, the peacefulness.

When they heard the taxi coming up the hill Laurence said, 'I'm sorry it all turned out like this—that you had the journey down for so short a visit.'

She said, brightly, 'It wasn't quite wasted, at least I brought the birthday champagne! It'll be a much nicer party without me.'

Again Laurence made no comment. They went down the drive together. He helped her in and put her suitcase in after her.

'Don't be unhappy,' he said, his hand on the door.

She smiled. 'No,' she said, 'no, of course not.'

She wept bitterly all the way back to the station.

9

THE evening following the birthday party fiasco Hayton telephoned Laurence to complain that his wife had returned to London 'in a very distressed condition' after spending no more than a couple of hours at Redlands instead of the planned weekend. She was very much upset by Gavin's attitude to her, and if the boy was already as out-of-hand as that after only a few months of being away from home the sooner he was in the care of some institution which catered for people like himself and had a bit of discipline and moral training the better. . . .

He spoke so loudly in his angry vehemence that Laurence held the receiver at a little distance from his ear and had a feeling of wanting to take cover from the heavy hailstone-downpour of words. He was also anxious about a stewpan of mushrooms he had on the gas-cooker for the evening meal; it was true he had turned the gas down low when the telephone bell rang, but if Hayton didn't dry up soon the mushrooms would, he reflected gloomily.

When Hayton at last drew breath Laurence said he was very sympathetic to Lady Hayton's distress, and had been at the time. It was unfortunate that she had overheard Gavin's remark addressed to the kitten but it hadn't really called for her rushing back to town like that, as he had tried to make her see, and it was surely taking an extreme line to read delinquency into it. The truth was that Gavin and his mother had never been really close——

'He was jealous when she married me,' Hayton interrupted, irritably.

'I gather they were never very close, even before that,' Laurence went on, 'and now Gavin's condition—the difficulties of

communicating satisfactorily—aggravate the matter. Lady Hayton isn't at ease with Gavin since his affliction and unfortunately he's aware of it and resents it. It makes him feel he's become just a nuisance and embarrassment to her.'

'Nonsense!' Hayton bellowed down the line.

'Perhaps it is,' Laurence said, evenly, 'but dealing with people sealed off from all normal human contact calls for endless patience. A period of maladjustment is inevitable. Gavin is still not adjusted to living sealed off in total darkness and total silence. When he can read all he wants in Braille it'll be easier for him. Just now he's going through the period of frustration and despair.'

'So he's to be allowed to be as offensive as he likes to his mother, is that it?'

'There was no conscious offensiveness. He wasn't intending his mother should hear that remark. He was put out because the kitten had to be shut away and he behaved childishly. I say, will you excuse me for a minute, please? I've got something on the cooker—'

He put the receiver down and rushed into the kitchen and whipped the stewpan off the stove just in time. When he returned to the telephone Hayton had hung up.

He reported the telephone call to Gavin.

'The Boss rang up very annoyed with you for upsetting Mamma. Why don't you type her a nice letter of apology? After all she came laden with gifts and goodwill and she was very hurt.'

Gavin snatched his hand away, angrily.

'If I write she'll come charging down here again, and I don't want her. I used not to admit that I didn't love her. Well now I do, that's all. Even with the machine she can't find anything to say to me.'

Laurence took Gavin's unwilling hand again.

'It takes two to make a conversation.'

'I know that. The point is I've got nothing to say to her, either. If people haven't anything to say to each other why should they bother with each other?'

'It's not as simple as that. You are her son and she loves you and is unhappy because she can't cope.'

'Sorry for herself, you mean!'

'Yes, she's sorry for herself. She has reason to be. If you were only 'blind——'

Gavin snatched his hand away.

'Well, I'm not only blind, and it's worse for me than for her, wouldn't you think?'

Laurence took the boy's firmly closed hand, but made no attempt to open it for conversation.

They sat for a moment, then he gave Gavin the departure sign and went out into the kitchen to finish cooking the supper. When he came back into the room with the laden tray the boy had the kitten in his lap and his tears were falling into its fur. Laurence put down the tray and went over to him and put an arm round his shoulder, then took the kitten from him and wrote on his fingers simply, 'Supper.'

When the meal was over Gavin went to the typewriter and wrote his mother a letter. The letter Laurence hoped he would write.

It was the period of emotional storms and stresses born out of frustration and despair, which people who work with the deaf-blind know as the 'going-through-it' phase. The bouts would become less, Laurence knew, as time went on. It was early days yet. And the black patches were only intermittent; there were the good times, too; the times when Laurence came home from work in the evening to find Gavin happy and excited over something he had written during the day, and the progress he had made with Braille; times when he found him in the kitchen, competently preparing the evening meal, the table all correctly laid in the living-room, with perhaps fresh flowers arranged in a bowl in the centre. At weekends, when the weather was fine, they went for walks in the narrow lanes. They would lean on a gate and Laurence would take the boy's hand to tell him, 'We are looking out over a field of ripe wheat towards Torquay. The sea is very blue. The motor road far down below is humming with cars. We are lucky to be up here away from it.' Or, 'We are looking all up the coast to Portland Bill. The Teignmouth beaches are crowded with holiday-makers. There is a cargo boat anchored a way out, waiting for the tide to bring her in over the bar.'

And Gavin would smell the sea, and the last honeysuckle in the hedges, and the meadowsweet rampant in the ditches. He would feel the sun and wind on his face, and when Laurence told him about a skylark he would hear it sing in his mind. The weather-beaten wood of a field gate or the top of a stile would be sweet under his hands, and the touch of a foxglove to his fingertips.

They investigated the sailing-dinghy tied up at a quayside in Shaldon and found her elderly but seaworthy. She was called *Kathleen*, which delighted Gavin because it was Irish and the name of the sailing-boat at the Villa Napoli. She needed painting and she took more water on board than she should, 'But not enough to sink her,' Laurence declared, cheerfully. 'She'll last out the season until we put her up for the winter, and then in the spring we'll give her a new look!'

They took her out several times in the estuary when the winds were favourable—Laurence was not inclined to risk her in the open sea until he had overhauled her. Gavin was rapturously happy to be in a sailing-boat again, and it intensified his longing for the Villa Napoli and the Irish *Kathleen*.

'We'll have my cousin Maureen for crew there,' he told Laurence. 'She's very handy in a boat. You'll like her.'

Laurence wondered; the virginal Irish colleen, dewy-innocent, pure in heart? He was altogether uneasy about this visit to the Irish grandparents upon which the boy's heart was so strongly set, his father's people, Anglo-Irish, comfortably off, horsey, Georgian silver on the side-board, church on Sundays, kind good extroverted unimaginative people . . . what would they make of him, in their innocence, totally devoid of any background he cared to remember? Would they perceive the wolf's ears obtruding from the sheepskin? Fear stirred in him.

But it was far enough ahead to be pushed out of sight without too much difficulty. The present was the only reality and it left little time for brooding on the past or worrying about the future. He was doing no outside work with the blind as he had hoped to; there was no time, unless he took it away from Gavin and the garden work at weekends, which he felt unable to. The constantly recurring thought that he had led a socially more useful life in

London worried him. To what extent was he justified in devoting all the spare time from earning his living to looking after this one boy, 'when in London he had been helping a number? Was the argument that Gavin was a special case, because of his emotional need and his genius—if it was that—really valid? Clare Williams thought so. But she knew nothing of his own hidden motives; and if she had some intuition in that direction it invalidated her judgment. He was uncertain of the purity of his motives. Gavin might have had both the emotional need and the genius, but if he had been possessed of an unattractive personality, if he, Laurence Oakes, had not felt personally drawn to this boy Gavin Edwards, would he have given up everything else for him—that everything else which had had importance for him? But there was no one with whom he could discuss it—without filling in the background, which he was not merely not prepared to do but the very thought of which filled him with panic.

IO

NONE of the several editors who published Gavin's poems fairly frequently in their cultural weeklies knew anything about him. They judged that he was young, though not as young as he actually was. His identity was discovered purely by chance.

A young sub-editor, Maurice Berring, on the Sunday paper which had published a number of the poems, proposed to spend the second half of his annual leave in Torquay. His editor said, 'Whilst you're there you might look up Gavin Edwards—he's only about six miles away, I believe, and it would be interesting to know something about him. We might do a profile.'

Berring replied that he had had that in mind when he had decided to go to Torquay. He drove out along the Teign estuary and having inquired of two strangers who proved, inevitably, to be strangers there themselves, parked the car and entered a rustic-looking inn, reflecting that a pint would be welcome and that the local was the best bet for a local inquiry.

It was a weekday mid-morning and there was only one man in the bar beside the barman. Berring ordered his beer and inquired for the whereabouts of a house called Redlands. The publican told him that it was outside the village, at the top of a hill, and specified the lane leading up to it, adding, 'But it's no use going up there till evening. The gates are always locked in the day time till Mr. Oakes gets home from work around six-thirty. Was it young Mr. Hayton you wanted to see?'

Berring was puzzled. 'I understood the name was Edwards—Gavin Edwards.'

'You've got the first part of the name right,' the publican told him, 'but it's Hayton, not Edwards. That's the deaf and blind one. Mr. Oakes looks after him.'

The man leaning against the counter chimed in, 'That's all right, Charlie. He goes by the name of Edwards, too. Mr. Gavin Edwards. I deliver letters there in both names. A lot of typewritten letters he gets. Seems funny, being as he can't read 'em. I suppose the other feller reads 'em to him in deaf-and-dumb language.'

'I didn't know he was like that,' Berring said. 'How old is he?'

'Oh, just a bit of a lad—seventeen or eighteen, perhaps. Nice-looking lad. You'd never know he was blind, with his bright blue eyes staring at you. The other feller's a dark one—never a smile and you'd think words cost money, he's that sparing with them!'

'You got business with them?' the publican asked, curious.

'That's right,' Berring said, thinking it simpler.

'Just as well,' the postman told him. 'If it was a social call you wouldn't get much of a welcome. Several of the people here tried calling when they first came here and were given to understand callers weren't welcome, no matter who!'

'It must be difficult for them, in the circumstances,' the young man murmured.

Before he left the pub he learned that Mr. Oakes worked at the big hospital just outside Torquay. This information was forthcoming because the postman knew the husband of the woman who had gone up to the house to clean when the newcomers had first arrived. She, also, it seemed, had not cared for the curt and unsmiling Mr. Oakes, and the whole set-up, Berring gathered, had got on her nerves. He felt that he could hardly wait for six-thirty to investigate for himself. Oakes sounded a bit of a dragon. He hoped he could get past him to the young poet—but for that he'd need Oakes' co-operation. Without it he'd get precisely nowhere. Perhaps the fact that he was an admirer of Edwards's poems, and a sub-editor on the cultural Sunday paper that published them, would be points in his favour. He could only hope so.

Fearful that the dragon would arrive home and lock the gates behind him the young man drove up to the house well before six-thirty and sat in his car anxiously watching the glimmer of the road in his dimmed headlights.

Laurence, wearily pushing his bicycle up the last lap of the hill,

a little before six-thirty, wondered about the car parked opposite the gates of the house. A canoodling couple, he supposed, though they usually turned their cars off into the narrow side lanes.

As he approached the gates the car door opened and a tall young man stepped out and to his astonishment addressed him by name.

Laurence acknowledged his name and asked, brusquely, 'What can I do for you?'

The young man replied, pleasantly, 'You could do a great deal for me, if you'd be so kind. I'm by way of being a fan of young Mr. Edwards and it would mean a lot to me to meet him. I also happen to be a sub on the Sunday paper which has published a number of his poems, and my editor was thinking we might do a profile.'

'Gavin Edwards is deaf-blind and we don't want a lot of vulgar publicity,' Laurence said, curtly.

Berring smiled amiably.

'We are never vulgar, I assure you.'

'All publicity is vulgar.'

'Oh, come, Mr. Oakes. If you take that line then no writer should ever be reviewed, and no one written about! May I suggest that we at least ask Mr. Edwards what he feels about it? If he hates the idea of being interviewed I promise to leave at once and not attempt to persuade him. Don't you think you owe it to him at least to ask him?'

Laurence hesitated; he was tired, mentally and physically, as always when he reached home, and the thought of coping with this newspaper man added to his weariness. On the other hand Gavin might enjoy meeting a fan and might like the idea of being written up in the paper which published his poems fairly regularly; and with the Arcaid he could leave the two of them to it.

He said, 'All right. I expect he'll be delighted. There's a machine you can use for talking to him——'

He explained it, briefly, whilst he unlocked the gates.

As they went up the path to the house Berring noticed with some surprise that there were lights on.

'How does he know when it's dark?'

'He has a Braille watch. But he doesn't switch the lights on just

for me. He doesn't like to think of himself sitting in the dark. That may seem odd to you, as he lives all the time in darkness, but he's not unique in this, I assure you.'

They reached the house and Laurence propped his bicycle against the wall.

'We'll go in at the side door, if you don't mind. Gavin is usually in the kitchen putting some supper together.'

Gavin was in point of fact stirring some soup in a saucepan on the stove. Laurence touched him on the shoulder and the boy turned his face to look so directly at his friend, with his clear blue eyes, that it was with an effort that Berring realized that he was blind

'Hullo, Laurie. You're early. I've only just put the soup on.'

Laurence took his hand and said rapidly on his fingers.

'I have someone with me—a sub-editor of the Sunday you write for. Wants to do a write-up about you. Says he's a fan of yours. Seems a nice young man. What do you feel about being interviewed? You don't have to.'

'Oh, I'd love it! It's ages since I talked to anyone from outside. We can use the machine. It'll be great fun! Please introduce me.'

Laurence turned to the young man.

'I don't think you told me your name.'

Berring told him and Laurence repeated it to Gavin, then put the boy's right hand into the young man's and they shook hands.

'Hullo!' Gavin cried. 'I'm delighted to meet you. And I'm not just saying it.'

Berring looked helplessly at Laurence.

'I'd like to say something to him.'

'You can say all you want on the Arcaid. Just say hullo for now—like this! Take his left hand and write on it with your right. Watch me. I'll write hullo.'

Watching Laurence the young man spelled the word out on the boy's hand.

Gavin laughed.

'Hullo!' he cried, and added, 'Now let's go and talk on the Arcaid. You lead the way, Laurie.'

In the living-room Laurence showed Berring the machine.

'It's quite simple, you see—especially for anyone who types, which I suppose you do.'

'With two fingers, yes. But I don't suppose touch-typing is called for.'

'No, but don't go fast. Moving Braille isn't as easy to feel as stationary.'

The young man seated himself before the machine, and when Gavin was seated next to him Laurence went back to the kitchen.

Berring looked at the boy's eager face and was deeply moved.

'Are we ready?' Gavin asked.

Berring touched his hand to indicate that he was there and ready to begin, then began to write: 'This is a very great honour ...'

Gavin laughed, delightedly.

'It's nice of you to say that, but it's completely wonderful for me your coming here like this. I never have anyone to talk to!'

His loud, eager voice came clearly to Laurence in the kitchen. He closed the door, his face darker than usual.

II

EVEN Laurence was bound to admit that Maurice Berring's piece the following Sunday was impeccable, offering an intelligent appreciation of Gavin Edwards as a young poet of promise, and on the personal side entirely free from chatty trivia. Laurence wished only that there had been no reference to the fact that Gavin was blind and deaf. Gavin was writing poetry long before all that happened. Would he be writing the same sort of poetry if it hadn't happened? Maurice Berring apparently thought not. But he could be wrong; Gavin had been excited by *The Habit of Perfection* before ever it had any special subjective significance for him.

Laurence transcribed the piece into Braille for Gavin, who read it fairly easily and was delighted with it.

'It makes me feel quite famous!' he declared.

'Do you want to be that?'

Gavin laughed. 'At school I used to dream of being a well-known poet one day. I haven't thought about it since my illness. After that I wrote because I had to do something or go mad! Now I think I'd like to be known—to be famous. Yes.'

'It takes years. One write-up in a posh Sunday won't do it for you!'

But the write-up in the posh Sunday had repercussions, all the same . . . the first of which was a letter from B.B.C. television with a suggestion for an interview.

Gavin was delighted; Laurence appalled.

'It would be a mistake,' he declared. 'I hope you won't do it. I'm certainly not prepared to co-operate in it.'

'Why not? I don't understand. It would be fun, and earn us some guineas as well! What's your objection?'

'They won't be able to resist the sensational line—deaf-blind

boy-poet. Even your Sunday paper couldn't resist that, and these people won't be content just to mention it in passing; they'll plug it. Is that the kind of fame you want?

'What's wrong with it? It's a true description, isn't it?'

'I thought we were agreed that what is important is that you are a poet, not that you are afflicted. Do you want to appear on the screen to be stared at like a freak in a circus?'

Gavin snatched his hand away, furiously.

'Everyone is stared at on the screen—that's what they're there for—it's the whole idea! If you won't do it with me I'll get someone else—Mrs. Williams.'

Laurence took his hand to say, 'All right. I'll telephone her tonight and see what she says.'

Clare was very interested to know that as a result of the write-up in the Sunday paper Gavin was invited to appear in a television interview. She could see no objection to it and was surprised that Laurence should.

'If he wants to become known as a poet the more publicity he has of the right kind the better, I should have thought. What do you see wrong with it?'

'That he goes on as a kind of freak—exploiting his disability. It's not because they think him such a remarkable young poet that they want him, but because he has a curiosity-value for them—the fact that he's both blind and deaf. That makes him a bit of a novelty—really something for their viewers to view! Do you approve of that sort of thing?'

She said, thoughtfully, 'I see your point.'

He insisted, 'If Maurice Berring hadn't mentioned that this new young poet was deaf-blind you don't suppose he would have had this offer, do you?'

'I don't know. I honestly don't know. I don't know enough about the TV business. I'm not a viewer.'

'I'm not, either, but I was once invited to take part in a TV programme. I refused for the reason I think Gavin should refuse—an objection to exploitation. "Young poet" is of no particular interest. There are too many of them. But "deaf-blind boy-poet"—that's quite something. It's a gimmick. Don't you see?'

'I see, but I'm not as sure as you are that it's a bad thing. Do you object to Helen Keller's public appearances?'

'I'm afraid I do.'

'We must discuss it properly next time we meet. The point now, I take it, is that Gavin wants to do this thing and you refuse to co-operate?'

'Absolutely. They'd like me to appear with him for added interest—Mr. Laurence Oakes, his devoted friend and companion. Not nearly so interesting if they just get someone in from outside for the occasion. Gavin would like *you* to do it, as I refuse to. How do you feel about that?'

'I don't think I'd mind. And it would be better for Gavin to have someone he knows——'

Gavin insisted on replying himself to the letter from the television producer. He said that he would be pleased to take part in the programme but that Mr. Oakes would be unable to do so because of his hospital duties. The lady who had been his home-teacher in London was, however, willing to help. He gave her address and telephone number.

He then wrote to his mother:

My dear Mother,

You will be interested to know that I have been invited to take part in a TV programme on Dec. 1st next at 6.30 p.m. This has come about as the result of the article about me last Sunday, which I expect you saw. Laurie doesn't approve and says he doesn't think you will either, but I hope he is wrong. Mrs. Williams will be with me. She doesn't agree with Laurie's attitude. We will be going back on the midnight train, so there will be time for a meal in town after we leave the studio. We thought of going to a Chinese place Laurie knows and perhaps you would like to join us if you are free to. I am very excited about it all. I am writing to Maureen. If they haven't got television I am sure they know someone who has, either in Killiney or Dublin. I expect they will be thrilled, especially Maureen. I hope you will be pleased too.

Your loving son,

Gavin.

p.s. They are going to pay me ten guineas!

p.p.s. Best wishes to Helga and love to Peter. He must be getting quite big.

p.pp.s. Minna is expecting.

He usually left his letters for Laurence to run through for the correction of typing errors and the insertion of words which had run off the page. This one he sealed up, addressed, and went down the lane to post himself.

Vivien read the letter with mixed feelings. She was pleased that Gavin had written to tell her himself, and that he had invited her to join him and Laurie at the Chinese restaurant, but she was dubious about the thing itself. Of course it was wonderful that Gavin should be beginning to be taken notice of in this way, whilst still so young and only just beginning to be published, and but for his affliction it would be a fine thing for him, but as things were you couldn't be sure he wouldn't seem to be making an exhibition of himself—parading his affliction, as you might say.

She expressed these doubts to James, who declared them to be nonsense. The boy wanted to become known in the literary world, didn't he? Very well, then, the more publicity in all directions the better. Of course he would be making an exhibition of himself; everybody who appeared on TV did precisely that—an exhibition of ideas or personality—or *something*. Let the world see what a physically handicapped young man could achieve. What was wrong with that? Why shouldn't he exploit his disability when it paid him to? Since he had to endure it he might as well get something out of it when he had the chance.

It was a point of view, Vivien conceded, but one she couldn't bring herself to accept. She would feel bound to watch on the day, yet shrank from the idea of seeing her son in the role of the deaf-blind young poet—for people to stare at with morbid curiosity, and to pity. That seemed horrible. She wondered how Gavin himself could bear it; but perhaps he didn't realize. His letter was almost childish in its naive excitement. That Laurence disapproved and refused to have anything to do with it she found comforting.

She wrote to Gavin congratulating him and saying she would

look forward to the date with great interest, and to joining him and Laurence afterwards for a meal if it was at all possible. She would have to see how things shaped and would let him know nearer the time. She added, 'We all thought the piece about you on Sunday very nice.' Then wondered if that sounded silly. But what else could one say? She had thought it rather a dull piece—when it wasn't quite beyond her, like Gavin's poems.

She wished she didn't so often feel like a goose that has hatched a swan.

Gavin enjoyed everything about the television outing. In the train to London he told Laurence, 'I feel as though I've been let out of prison!'

'We've done walks,' Laurence protested, 'and trips into Teignmouth and Torquay.'

He was glad he had tipped the guard to let them have the compartment to themselves. Reserved labels had been pasted on to the windows on the corridor side and Laurence had drawn down the blinds so that they should be spared the fascinated stares of passing fellow-passengers. Gavin had asked whether there was anyone else in the carriage and when he had been told no had put his feet up on the opposite seat and given himself up to enjoyment of the journey.

'We haven't been anywhere for ages,' he insisted.

For some weeks the weather had been bad at weekends which now that it was dark when he got in from work were the only opportunities for going out. He had suggested that they might go down for an evening to the club run by the earnest young man who had called on them, and that they should go to the centre for the rehabilitation of the blind in Torquay, but Gavin had been impatient of both suggestions, declaring that he couldn't be bothered with strangers. Laurence, long disciplined to patience, suppressed a feeling of injustice.

'It's not easy for me to get days off for trips to town,' he pointed out.

But Gavin's mind was already off on another tack. He hoped they had television at the Villa Napoli. He liked to think of them

all sitting there watching him. Probably some of the chaps he had known at both his schools would be watching, and some of the masters. And Hugh Ross, and other people he had known at the san. Perhaps some of them would write to him. It was all very exciting. And it was all due to Mr. Maurice Berring. If he hadn't had a few days' holiday in Torquay and taken the opportunity to come and see him there would have been no write-up and no TV appearance. 'If he had decided to spend his few days at Brighton, for instance, we shouldn't be in the train to London now! Everything in life is just chance, isn't it? Or don't you think so?'

Laurence told him, 'I've no theories about life.'

'You must have. Everybody has. You either believe in the will of God, or predestination, or chance—or something. You can't help believing in something—having some sort of theory.'

'I've none. I cope with the business of living as best I can and one day I shall finish with it, like everything else that lives, from an elephant to an ant.'

'Don't you ever ask yourself why things happen? Why Maurice Berring went to Torquay instead of to Brighton, for example—'

'Presumably because he prefers Torquay!'

'But why *should* he prefer it?'

'Probably for the simple reason that it has a better climate for a winter holiday.'

'He could have gone to Nice and had it even better!'

'Costs more. Also Torquay had the added attraction of giving him the chance to look up Gavin Edwards—whose poems he admires and about whom both he and his editor were curious. One thing leads to another. Law of cause and effect. It's as simple as that!'

'I call that having a theory!'

'I thought facts were one thing and theories another.'

Gavin said, stubbornly, 'Cause and effect is also a theory. Any number of causes can produce the same effect. So chance is as good an explanation as any.'

He sensed Laurence's smile and withdrew his hand, angrily.

'You never want to talk seriously,' he complained.

Laurence possessed himself of Gavin's unwilling hand to say,

'Life is for living not theorizing about. Whatever you believe or don't believe it all comes to the same in the end. But it's fact not belief that a steward is coming along the corridor offering coffee. Would you like some?'

Clare was waiting for them at Paddington, and at the strong clasp of her small fine hand on his again the old confidence and affection rose in Gavin.

'You still smell of violets,' he said, happily, and felt her smiling.

She raised his hand to the upturned collar of her coat and his fingers knew the reality of the flowers tucked there. He bent forward to smell them and felt their softness against his lips. She smiled at Laurence across the boy's bent head.

'Are you coming out to Shepherd's Bush with us?'

'No. There are some deaf-blind people I want to look up whilst I'm in town. I'll come out around six and wait for you downstairs.'

He touched Gavin's cheek.

'Oh, are you going?'

'Yes. See you later. Good luck on the air.'

When they were in a taxi Laurence had got for them Clare told Gavin, 'Your mother telephoned. She can't join you and Laurence for a meal this evening but will come to the station tonight to see you off. She will be watching the programme. She sends you her love and good wishes.'

He made no comment. He didn't want to admit that he was glad his mother wasn't coming and couldn't bring himself to say he was sorry. It was not anyhow important, one way or another. This was his special day, and even if he could see and hear it could hardly be more exciting. He was even glad he was going on the air without Laurie; he had the feeling it would be easier with Mrs. Williams.

He asked her, 'Have you ever been to a TV studio before?'

'No.'

'Will you be nervous?'

'I don't think so. I've only to give you their questions and you've only to answer them.'

'Supposing they ask silly questions?'

'Just answer them politely.'

'I think I'm beginning to be a little nervous! All those faces I can't see looking at me.'

'Even if you had sight you wouldn't see them. Forget them. Just think of your grandparents and cousin watching and listening far away in Ireland. Smile for them.'

It seemed strange to them both that for the few minutes they would be on the air they must spend hours at the studio, a good deal of the time merely waiting about. Clare found the repetitiveness of the rehearsals a little tedious, both Gavin's item and the other features in the programme, though at first it had been amusing to watch various celebrities being put through their paces by the bored-looking young man who was producing the programme rather as though they were not very bright school-children—the middle-aged theatrical critic told to try and sound less as though he were reading the script, the woman novelist told to bring more voice to it, a young man reading a talk on antiques rebuked for gabbling . . . 'and Mrs. Williams, Mr. Edwards appears to be raising his voice. Would you ask him, please, to keep it at normal conversational level?'

She said, patiently, 'I'm sorry, but you will appreciate that he cannot hear his voice and he is speaking at the level now normal for him.'

'You don't think he could modulate it?'

'I'm quite sure he can't.'

'I see.' He looked put out for a moment, then thought of something else. 'One other thing—and in this perhaps you can accommodate us. When you are talking to Mr. Edwards could you hold his hand in such a way that it doesn't block his face. Do you have to hold it up?'

'It's what he's used to. I'd rather not try anything different. He might become nervous and confused.'

'I see,' the young man said again, bitterly. He added, 'We'll have to do something about positioning you both differently, then.'

A young woman, balancing knock-kneed on stiletto heels and hung with gilt beads smiled with a routine sweetness at Clare and asked if she and Mr. Edwards would go along to the make-up room.

'What fun!' Gavin cried when Clare told him what was happening.

When it was done he wanted to know what he looked like. Clare told him, 'Your face is masked with brown powder. So is mine and everyone else's. It looks terrible, but they say that under the strong lights we should look even more terrible without it.'

The girl who had done Gavin's makeup watched fascinated whilst Clare said this on Gavin's hand.

Clare smiled at her and the girl said, 'I think it's wonderful how you go so fast. I wish I could talk to him. Such a nice-looking boy. It does seem a terrible shame. Please wish him luck for me.'

Clare did this and Gavin immediately wanted to know what the girl was like.

'Blonde. Pretty,' Clare told him.

The girl asked, eagerly, 'What did you tell him?'

'I told him you were blonde and pretty.'

The girl laughed, self-consciously, but further conversation was prevented by the return of the young woman with the beads.

'If you're both ready, Mrs. Williams——'

She led the way back to the studio, where shirt-sleeved young men now rode into position huge cameras mounted on what looked to Clare like gun-carriages. Whilst this was happening the theatrical critic came over to where Clare and Gavin sat and said, 'I was so interested in the profile on Sunday. Would you tell him for me? And that I think he's terribly good in this programme. You too. Don't let the snooty young men ruffle you.'

Clare smiled. 'I've had years of training in patience. I'll tell Gavin what you say——'

'Mr. Heatherley, if you'd be so kind——' a weary voice full of narrowly suppressed irritation said, and the distinguished critic went back like a small boy to his place in class.

The red light went on; the seconds ticked. Clare gave Gavin the agreed warning signal for silence. Then a heavily cultured voice was declaring energetically, 'We have with us in the studio this evening a very remarkable young man who has been both blind and deaf since he was sixteen, and who is beginning to make a name for himself as a poet, Mr. Gavin Edwards. With him is his friend

Mrs. Clare Williams, an L.C.C. home-teacher to the deaf-blind, who will interpret through the hand-language the questions put to him. Mr. Gavin Edwards——'

Gavin knew from the heat of the lights on his face and by the pressure of Clare's fingers that he was on the air. He smiled, nervously, and licked lips gone suddenly dry, and then felt the speaking fingers.

'Mr. Edwards, can you tell us something about what it feels like to be enclosed in a world of total darkness and total silence?'

To this Clare added, 'Don't be nervous. What you said during rehearsal was fine.'

Gavin said, 'At first it's frightening. You feel desperate; that you'd rather die. Then you begin to recognize people by touch, and you begin to make out what they're writing in your hand and you don't feel so panic-stricken. You begin to adapt, to find your way about. You soon learn the finger-alphabet and when you get a good manual speaker like Mrs. Williams you're really in touch with life again.'

'That's the key word, isn't it—*touch*?'

'Everything is touch, yes. You literally have all life at your fingertips.'

He saw Maureen very clearly in his mind and smiled at her.

'And of course you learned to read Braille. Did you find that difficult?'

'At first, yes, but I was desperate to be able to read again and I worked hard at it. Also I had a very good Braille teacher.'

He hadn't said this during the rehearsal, but suddenly he thought of Laurence watching and had an impulse to make the small tribute. He hoped Laurence would be pleased.

'And of course you can write in Braille?'

'Yes. I have a machine for that. I write my poems on it so that I can read them back and make any alterations I want. But I write letters on the typewriter.'

He was no longer nervous; he had got into his stride and felt that he could go on all night if need be. Whilst waiting for the questions to be repeated on his hand he smiled at his unseen

viewers, seeing Maureen always, very clearly, in the front of a vast faceless audience.

The questions went on: 'You wrote poetry when you were still at school—before you became blind and deaf? . . . What poets do you consider have most influenced you? . . . Do you feel that you have any special message as a poet?' That was one of the sillier questions, Gavin thought, but remembering what Mrs. Williams had advised he replied politely that he didn't think a poet had to have a message. He believed with Gordon Bottomley that poetry was founded on the hearts of men. It was an expression of the human spirit, compounded of suffering and ecstasy. He hadn't said that in the rehearsal, either; but he warmed to his subject and it came to him. He felt there was more to say about this, but the next question followed swiftly, preventing it.

Then unexpectedly Clare's fingers were telling him that the interview was finishing: 'Thank you very much, Mr. Edwards. We shall look forward to reading many more of your poems.'

The heat on his face was switched off and Clare was drawing him away. He moved again in the familiar darkness. The radiant interlude was over.

In the midnight train back to Devon the lamps he had felt on his face in the studio still seemed to burn behind his eyes, filling his head with light. He lay in his sleeper glowing with this sensation of light, and feeling the vibration of the wheels pleasurably in his body, a substitute for sound. The sensation of sound was so strong that it seemed to him that if he called to Laurence he must hear his own voice. He called, and there was immediately Laurence's answering hand, but no sound; only the vibration of the wheels turning in the night's darkness, and in the soundless darkness in himself. He withdrew his hand from Laurence's without saying anything, then turned on to his face, to stifle in the dust-smelling pillow a sudden attack of weeping.

Laurence heard, but gave no sign. Weeping was essentially as private a function as sex, and should be allowed to be. Too much had surfaced in response to those smooth questions, as he had known it would; all the initial panic and terror and claustrophobia;

and the despair. The boy had been carried along, excitedly, on the crest of the wave, as long as it had lasted; there had been congratulations and handshakings at the studio, and his mother's excitement at the station—"I thought he was marvellous! So self-confident! Do please tell him for me!"—intensified by the fact that the Irish cousin had telephoned his mother, sending congratulations from all at the Villa Napoli. Earlier Clare had embraced him when they had parted and told him he was wonderful; her violets had wilted in the studio heat but the embrace had crushed out their fragrance afresh and he had asked for them and she had tucked them into his overcoat pocket. Their last lingering scent was fugitively in the compartment with them now, persisting precariously, on the dusty stuffiness—all that was left of a brief glory. The shining wave had collapsed, fallen back upon itself, into the dark sea.

He lay listening to the smothered, secret weeping, feeling as remote from pity as on those nights in the hospital wards when patients moaned and whimpered in restless sleep. Pity like pain went deeper; down to the very grass-roots of being; into the abyss of emotional involvement. In that abyss pity warred in him with a kind of bitter love.

ONE of the several letters—there were not so many as Laurence had feared there might be—Gavin received following his television appearance was from Hugh Ross. It had been the shock of his life, Ross wrote, to see his young friend on TV. He had seen it announced in the *Radio Times* ‘Gavin Edwards, the Deaf-Blind Poet’, but he hadn’t connected it with the Gavin he had met at the san, because that Gavin’s surname had been Hayton, and he wasn’t blind and deaf; but when he saw him on the screen he knew at once it was the same, and then of course he mentioned Hopkins as the poet who had influenced him most and there wasn’t any doubt about it being the Gavin he had known. He supposed he had taken the name of Edwards as a pen-name. He was extremely sorry to hear he was now blind and deaf; that must be terrible, but he seemed to be coping most amazingly. He had had no return of his lung trouble, he wrote, and had his old job back in a firm of chartered accountants in the City. He wrote from an address in a London suburb. He wished they could meet again, but as he couldn’t speak the hand-language it would be no good. ‘I imagine someone will put this letter into Braille for you,’ he concluded, ‘and as you said on the TV you typed letters perhaps you would let me hear from you.’

Gavin was very excited to receive this letter and typed a reply immediately. ‘If you are ever down this way please come and see me,’ he wrote. ‘We could easily talk as I have a wonderful machine like a typewriter,’ and he told him about the Arcaid. He told him also about the hill-top house where he lived with a friend who had worked for years with the deaf-blind, and who was a good Braillist and manual speaker. ‘So you see I have everything,’ he wrote.

There were times when he felt this so strongly that it approximated to happiness—the only happiness possible for him, which was complete resignation. The television appearance and Ross's letter gave him a feeling of normal contact with the world outside his private world of darkness and silence. Maurice Berring's visit did not give him this because of the necessity to speak through the machine; but he had appeared on television like anyone else and he had received a letter from a friend like anyone else—even though it had to be transcribed for him in Braille. But he could hold it in his hands as a normal letter, and he could reply to it on the typewriter in the normal way.

To everything that was normal he attached tremendous importance. He liked, still, to handle the copy of Hopkins' poems which Ross had given him, even though he could no longer read it. He was grateful for Braille because it gave him reading, but it couldn't give him books as he had once known them. Everything in Braille was necessarily cumbersome; it was precious reading matter, but a Braille publication was not a book, with jacket and binding and 'feel', something to be enjoyed for its 'production' apart from its contents. Books as he had once known them were finished for him. But he could still receive an ordinary letter, slit the envelope, feel the pages, and it was this he cherished, not the Brailled version.

Maureen wrote fairly frequently, and even before he knew the contents of the letters the feel of them made him happy. She wrote on the good deckle-edged notepaper favoured by their grandmother, with embossed address, which he could feel with fingertips grown super-sensitive. Had she been able to send the letters to him already Brailled they would not have meant as much to him.

Associated with this idea of normality was his preference for being talked to on his hand rather than through the machine. The machine was very useful and would be increasingly so as his proficiency with Braille increased; it would be wonderful for talking with Maureen and his grandparents, and Hugh Ross if he ever visited him, and anyone else who wanted to talk to him but couldn't do so through the hand-language; but no machine could substitute for the loss of a look or a smile as, to some extent, living

fingers could. A machine could give you the words, but not the way in which they were said, which touch somehow did. That tiredness, laughter, sympathy, irritation, tenderness, could all be conveyed by touch had come to seem as natural to him as the inflections of a voice or the expression on a face once had. It was not compensation; there were no compensations; none whatever; but it was something—the something that is always better than nothing.

There were these better days, when resignation deputized for happiness; but there were the other times when he was engulfed in black tides of despairing rage against fate or God, or whoever or whatever was responsible for this monstrous double affliction. Until then he had never questioned the existence of God. He had been brought up in conventional schools with the conventional routine religious observances. Neither of his parents went to church but it was somehow taken for granted that at the right time he would be 'confirmed'—in that faith to which they themselves barely gave even lip-service. But as automatically as he had been christened when he was three weeks old so when he was thirteen he was sent to confirmation classes and in due course, with friends of his own age-group, for the most part of similarly irreligious but conventional parents, confirmed. Thereafter he had gone to Holy Communion at Easter and Christmas and thought very little about it. It was just one of the things you did. You weren't 'religious', but you were Christian, and that meant believing in certain things, whether you did much about them or not. You believed that Jesus was the son of God and born of the Virgin Mary; that he was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day rose again. You accepted that his being born of the Virgin Mary with no earthly father had to do with the Holy Ghost. It was all a holy mystery so you didn't have to understand it, any more than about God creating the world. There had to be some explanation for everything and God was as good an answer as any.

There had been a boy at his public school who didn't believe any of all this and who said his parents didn't either—nor, he declared, did most people nowadays; it was all a lot of hooey. He had wanted to know whether Gavin really seriously believed all

that mumbo-jumbo. Gavin had been bewildered rather than shocked. There had to be some explanation for everything, he protested. There was, the young atheist proclaimed: there was Science.

Gavin hadn't felt disposed to argue; as it was nothing you could prove, one way or the other, there didn't seem any point in doing so. And humbug and hooey as it might be, the fact remained that he quite liked going to church, especially at Easter, when it was full of spring flowers; he liked the music and the stained-glass windows, and a certain feeling of mystery about it all. He liked the idea of being confirmed, and it gave him a pleasant feeling of virtue going off to Holy Communion before breakfast. He also liked scripture lessons at school; there were some fine things in the Bible—pure poetry, though this was a strictly private thought which he never uttered aloud until he met Hugh Ross and discovered that poetry could be talked about without self-consciousness, as a living thing. He understood from Ross that Hopkins was a Roman Catholic, a Jesuit priest. Ross declared of himself that he was not anything; he called himself an agnostic, he said, because he didn't know; atheism, he insisted, was an oversimplification, and as dogmatic as its antithesis. You couldn't separate Hopkins from his religious beliefs, to be sure, but you could accept the poetry even if you rejected the beliefs.

That made sense to Gavin; he even wondered if he, too, was an agnostic. When he was with Ross he thought perhaps he was; but left to himself he found it difficult to abandon the ideas he had grown up with, which were part of his education, like Shakespeare; Ross could be wrong, he thought, and hoped so; he preferred to believe in the existence of God, if only as a kind of benign headmaster in charge of the universe.

At the Villa Napoli he was always expected to go to church on Sunday mornings with his grandparents and Maureen, and when his mother was there she also went, as a matter of course; it was the custom, the done thing, and there was nothing against it. You never even thought about it.

It was not until he lost sight and hearing that he began to question seriously the beliefs in which he had been brought up,

and he did so then in intense bitterness of spirit, asking himself if God were good, as you were taught, why had he struck him down at the age of sixteen, with this terrible double affliction? What had he ever done that was bad enough to warrant such a punishment? It had happened to Helen Keller when she was only two years old; what could a child of two have done to be so terribly punished? And if it wasn't God's punishment why did it have to happen? Why did this God, who was called the God of Love, and supposed to be All-Merciful, allow it to happen? Why? Why? It made no sense.

He asked Laurence about it, but Laurence said, 'I am not a suitable person to ask, because I don't believe and never did even as a child. I only know, from what I've seen in hospital, and in working with the deaf-blind, that no amount of suffering ever makes a true believer disbelieve.'

'But how do they explain it? How can they go on believing that God is good when all the evidence is against it?'

Laurence replied that he didn't know; he had often wondered, but he had never asked, because if it comforted people to have these beliefs—and it evidently did—it seemed wrong to ask awkward questions; but when he could he would ask one of the parsons who visited at the hospital and get the official answers.

A little later he told Gavin, 'I've got the answers for you about God's love and human suffering. It seems you have to believe in the Will of God, beyond human understanding, and your true believer is capable of that act of faith, which nothing can change. Also it seems evil came into the world with the Fall and man has been suffering ever since as the result of it and is bound to do so till the end of time.'

'I call that very unfair!' Gavin protested.

'There's an answer to that, too. It is that whom God loves he chastens with suffering, for the good of his immortal soul.'

'How can people believe that?'

'If you believe that God allowed his beloved son to die in agony on the cross it shouldn't be difficult to believe that he is willing to allow ordinary mortals to die of cancer or live out their lives in darkness and silence for one spiritual reason or another.'

'I think it's all horrible!' Gavin cried. 'I don't believe any of it! If there was such a God I would hate him! I would say he was a devil, not a god. But I don't believe any of it any more!'

But belief, he discovered, was not so easily uprooted; what reason rejected could still persist irrationally deep down inside oneself as a superstition. On his bad days, when despair and resentment were uppermost in him, he reverted to the belief in God out of the necessity to have someone, something, to turn and rend. On the good days, in the moods of resignation, he would tell himself that he was agnostic, but he was never able to overcome a nostalgia for the days of unquestioning belief. It must be very comforting—in fact it must be quite wonderful—if in spite of all suffering you really believed that it was the will of God and therefore all serving a divine purpose; all for the best.

This conflict between belief and unbelief, resignation and despair, intensified the creative urge, and he wrote endlessly. A good deal of what he wrote he destroyed, recognizing that it was pure emotionalism, not the recreation of emotion into poetry. But some of it was poetry, and found its way into print, and Valentine Merrion, a publisher who had been watching the work of this young poet, Gavin Edwards, for some time, and whose interest had been further stimulated by the television interview, finally decided that the time had come to propose a collection of these poems of darkness and silence into the traditional slim volume of *First Poems*, to be published in the late spring or early summer of next year. There would be no money in it, to be sure, either for himself or the young man, but there could be prestige eventually for his publishing list, and a young poet has to start somewhere. He was a good-looking young man, and with his picture on the jacket and a blurb about him being doubly afflicted, and with any luck another TV appearance around publication date, the book might even have a modest success. . . .

THE fact of a publisher interested in his work did a good deal for Gavin's morale. He wrote Mr. Merrion numerous letters discussing what should go in and concerning alterations he proposed to make in various lines. The poems he wanted to alter he transcribed into Braille and worked on continuously, with intense creative excitement. Laurence Brailled all the correspondence for him so that he would have it to refer to. When the first proofs came he read them for printers' errors but suggested to Gavin that he have the publisher send a second set to Maurice Berring for his professional assistance. This was done and Berring proved to be very willing to help and offered some useful suggestions—which meant more correspondence for Laurence to Braille. It amazed him that there could be so much work in the production of so small a book. He found himself hoping that Gavin never decided to write a novel.

As the weeks went by he felt himself so much involved in the book that when Gavin suddenly announced that he intended dedicating it to Hugh Ross it came as a shock—as though a stranger had been introduced into a family party. It had not occurred to him that Gavin might dedicate it to him; he had not thought about a dedication, but if there was to be one why Ross, he asked Gavin, what had he got to do with it?

'He introduced me to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins—the poet who has had the greatest influence on me,' Gavin told him, importantly.

'I know, but if you're going to dedicate the book why not to Maurice Berring, who has been so helpful with the proofs?'

'I can put in an acknowledgment to him for his help, but the book belongs to Hugh,' Gavin insisted, stubbornly, and a little irritated because it seemed to him Laurence was being tiresome.

There was no more to be said. Ross was written to and offered the dedication and wrote back that he was delighted and honoured to accept. Gavin debated the wording of the dedication and finally settled on, 'For Hugh, to whom I owe so much.' A note of acknowledgment to Maurice Berring, 'for assistance with proofs and greatly valued advice', was inserted. Writing to say that this had been done Mr. Merrion wondered whether some acknowledgment should perhaps be made to Mr. Oakes 'who has also put in a lot of work on the preparation of the book for press', but Laurence omitted this part of the letter when Brailleing it. After all, if it hadn't occurred to Gavin, he thought, wily, any such acknowledgment would be valueless.

That he was capable of this kind of jealousy startled and dismayed him. It was at variance with his ideal of selfless service, asking nothing in return, not even gratitude. Certainly not gratitude; no one had the right to expect that, putting a price on giving. And if Gavin's book had carried no dedication at all, and no acknowledgment, it would not even have occurred to him to resent the omission of any reference to himself; but because two other people had been associated with it the exclusion of himself rankled—a fact he found deeply humiliating.

Gavin called his poems *An Owl in the Night*, which was also the title of the longest, and for him the most important, poem in the book. The owl calling in the night, as he had heard it that night in the garden of the Villa Napoli, the last sound he had ever heard before the silence closed in on him, was the symbol of his lost world of light and sound, and nostalgia for that cry in the night was the leit-motif which drew the poems together into a whole.

The book was pleasantly produced, decorated with line-drawings by a woman artist who had some reputation as a wood-engraver. A poet known at least to the intelligentsia wrote a highfalutin' foreword in which occurred such felicitous phrases as 'rhythmic flexibility', 'unified sensibility', 'emotional complexity', 'inner pressures', 'poetic self-containment'. In the blurb on the inside flap of the jacket the publisher recklessly suggested that 'this seventeen-year-old deaf-blind poet' was the spiritual descen-

dant of Gerard Manley Hopkins. On the back flap was a smiling photograph of the handsome young poet and below it a biographical note in which his father was referred to as the 'late Terence Edwards, the well-known foreign correspondent'. The family, the note continued, was Anglo-Irish and the young poet's nostalgia for the Dublin Mountains background of his childhood was poignantly evoked . . .

Both blurb and biographical note were written by Mr. Merrion himself, and he was very pleased with them; 'poignant' and 'evoked' were always good words for use on a book jacket; he was only sorry he hadn't been able to work in 'significant' as well, but as a number of the novels he had published recently had gone out with this word applied to them on their jackets perhaps it was as well. Advance copies of the Edwards book—always referred to in the office as *The Owl*—were sent to various well-known and semi-well-known literary people, each with a personal letter signed by Mr. Merrion himself hoping that they would find something to say about 'this collection of first poems by a seventeen-year-old boy who is both blind and deaf', which could be used in advertising. A few replied, expressing themselves 'moved', 'impressed', 'excited'. Others, for one reason or another—they were abroad, or busy, or couldn't be bothered, or found the poems not very remarkable, or objected to the young poet's disability being exploited—didn't answer. But enough replied to provide an impressive list of 'quotes'. The book was also submitted—with a deferential personal letter from Mr. Merrion—to the Poetry Book Club and was made the choice for the month.

All this 'spade work', as Mr. Merrion called it, deferred publication until June, but, as he pointed out to its impatient young author, the postponement had saved it from being swamped in the high tide of the Spring List. As it was it had been 'born into success'.

For the most part the reviewers handled the book with tact rather than enthusiasm. One complained that with so many distinguished names assembled to declare the young poet a genius in advance the critic was in an invidious position, but the young man appeared to have some latent talent which might develop if he could liberate himself from the Hopkins influence and strike

out on his own. A woman reviewer on a provincial paper went into raptures over the 'dark beauty' of the poems and made much of the double affliction of the 'boy poet', with an inevitable reference to Helen Keller. London reviewers were inclined to play down the double affliction aspect, determined not to allow it to influence their literary judgment, and fell back upon the word 'sensitivity'. The more knowledgeable were aware of technical experiment and a certain newness of imagery that might be worth watching, but the general feeling appeared to be that the young poet was still feeling his way. No one, to Mr. Merrion's intense disappointment, found anything 'significant' in the poems.

The one 'rave' review was in the Sunday newspaper in which Gavin had made his debut. It was written by Maurice Berring, who deliberately over-praised because he did sincerely believe that Gavin Edwards had a poetic gift worth encouraging, and he was fearful of the delicate bud being nipped by the chill wind of unsympathetic criticism. The boy was a poet—if life would allow him to be. He was convinced of it. It might even be—accepting as he did that life had meaning—that the boy had to be plunged into darkness and silence for the vision of the poet to develop. There were so many bogus poets around—and he included among them the one who had written the preface to Gavin's book—that we were becoming conditioned to falsity, he contended, losing our ability to recognize the real thing on the rare occasions when it turned up, the authentic Promethean fire, the genuine article. This boy Gavin Edwards had been touched by it; it smouldered there in the brooding pain and passion of his verse; it could become a blaze, fanned by the wind of encouragement; or it could be snuffed out by indifference.

All this he would have said as an introduction to Gavin's book if he had been asked, but he had no 'name', so he was not asked, but he contrived to say something of it in his review—as a result of which Gavin was invited to make his second television appearance, this time to read some of his poems, Maurice Berring appearing with him, using the Arcaid for such questions as needed to be put to him by way of introduction and conclusion.

Gavin was even more excited by this television occasion than by

the first one, not only because this time he was an acclaimed poet reading his own work, but because instead of returning to Devon on the midnight train they were taking the Irish Mail to Holyhead and the boat. They would see him and hear him on the screen at the Villa Napoli, and some twelve hours later he would actually be with them. It was most wonderful.

Laurence occupied himself in town whilst Gavin was rehearsing, and returned to the studios shortly before the programme was due on the air. He waited downstairs in a lounge. Berring was to bring Gavin down there when his part in the programme was over. Laurence sat relaxed, sunk in a deep arm-chair, watching the traffic of people to the reception desk—the nervous ones and the confident ones, those to whom it was all new and strange and bewildering, and those to whom it was all familiar and unremarkable.

He was startled when a youngish—thirty-five or so—smartly dressed woman he had observed inquire at reception looked from the girl behind the desk to him and then made her way over to him. The hair under the fashionably high hat was pinkish, several shades lighter than her lipstick, and her eyes were elaborately made up. Like a high-class tart, he thought, involuntarily, but she did not attract him; he preferred his tarts less expensive-looking.

'Mr. Oakes?' he heard her saying, and she was bending forward to him, smiling, her eyes bright with interest and curiosity. 'My name is Kay Carter—if that means anything to you.'

He did not get up.

'Sorry,' he said.

She continued to smile.

'You probably read the posh Sundays. I'm from the *Sunday Sensation*.'

Bracelets with dangling charms tinkled at her wrists. He felt his flesh contracting.

'What can I do for you?' he inquired, unsmiling.

'Quite a lot. Shall we go and sit on that settee over there? I'd like to talk about Gavin Edwards.'

'Sorry,' he said again. 'No interviews to the press. Positively.'

'Oh, nonsense! There was one not long ago——'

'Posh Sunday, dearie. Not the *Sunday Sensation*.'

He heaved himself up out of the armchair.

'Mr. Edwards and I have a train to catch. I'm going for a taxi.'

'There's no need. I have a car. I can run you anywhere you want.'

'Thanks, but we'll take a taxi.'

'You're going back to Devon tonight?'

'Pork-and-greens.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Didn't you ever play it when you were a kid? The thing is not to get caught out saying yes or no to any question.'

'Seriously, Mr. Oakes——'

'I am serious. Pork-and-greens.'

He brushed past her to the door. She came after him.

'I don't want to ask you anything terribly personal, but the *Sunday Sensation* is very keen on a story this Sunday, and it will all help the sale of the book——'

He went out into the street, looked about, saw a taxi in the distance, signalled and succeeded in attracting the driver's attention. Whilst he waited for it to come up she still stood there. He rounded on her.

'For the love of Mike——'

'Why must you be so unpleasant?' she demanded. 'I have a job to do——'

He went back into the building and found Gavin and Maurice Berring already arrived in the lounge.

'Sorry,' he said, 'I went for a taxi.'

'I've got to get back to the office,' Maurice said. 'Perhaps you can drop me somewhere. I don't drive a car in town——'

'I can take you, Mr. Berring.'

Maurice turned to look at the speaker, then exclaimed, 'Oh, Kay Carter, isn't it? What are *you* doing here?'

'Trying to get Mr. Oakes to tell me something about the young poet, but he isn't playing.'

Laurence was talking to Gavin.

'How did it go?'

'Fine. I wasn't a bit nervous.'

'The taxi's here. Maurice has to get back to his office. Come.'
He led Gavin past Maurice and Miss Carter, but Maurice laid a hand on Gavin's arm.

'Say goodbye to him for me,' he urged Laurence.

Laurence took Gavin's hand again and told him.

'Oh, goodbye,' Gavin cried. 'Thank you for all your help.'

Maurice pressed his hand, then handed Laurence the Arcaid.

'Here's the machine—our good friend. I'll let Kay run me back—she's going up Fleet Street.'

Laurence said, firmly, 'Come with us. There's something I want to discuss with you. We'll take you all the way—we've got plenty of time.'

'He's terrified you'll answer my questions,' Kay said, bitterly.

Maurice smiled at her.

'Sorry, Kay, but people can't be interviewed against their will, you know, and a write-up in the *Sunday Sensation* isn't going to help.'

She said, grimly, 'He's going to have it, all the same!'

Maurice smiled and offered no comment, then followed the other two to the taxi.

As they drove away Laurence said, 'I haven't told her where we're going. She might get on to you to try and find out, but you don't know.'

'Does Merrion know?'

'No. But she won't get on to him. She wants the personal angle—how I came into Gavin's life, whether he has a girl friend—you know the sort of thing. Nothing else is any good to the *Sunday Sensation*. I was terrified you'd say something about Ireland. She could easily trace us to the Villa Napoli—plenty of newspaper men who know Terence Edwards must know that his family have a house on Killiney Bay.'

He took Gavin's hand to tell him that Maurice had come with them in the taxi after all.

'I never let him stay very long all alone, not knowing what is going on,' he explained, at the same time as Gavin was exclaiming about Maurice being with them and asking was he coming to see them off. He was still elated with the sense of having done well in the programme, and excited at returning to the Villa Napoli—to be going *home*. . . .

THE need for fresh air sent them out on deck before the ship berthed at Dun Laoghaire. It was not Laurence's first visit to Dublin but he had not told Gavin this as it would have involved him in explanations. If Gavin had asked him if he had been to Dublin before he would have lied and said no; but Gavin hadn't asked him and didn't then, but stood there beside him on the crowded deck feeling the pressure and movement of people and the throb of the ship's engine. There was the smell and feel of the sea and the warming touch of the early morning sun. Gavin wanted to know if there were gulls, if you could see the Sugar Loaf Mountain yet and the spire of Dun Laoghaire church.

'I see it all so clearly in my mind,' he cried. 'I long to see it all again with my eyes! Will I ever, do you think?'

Laurence pressed his hand and offered no answer. People turned to look, startled both by the loud voice and what was said; when they saw the white stick they glanced, slightly embarrassed, but wishing to convey sympathy, at the dark, rather dour-looking, man at the boy's side.

Gavin understood from the pressure on his hand that Laurence wanted them not to talk there, that it would be too attention-attracting. He knew that he should not have spoken as he did, for other people, the people he felt all about him, to hear. But there were times, and this was one of them, when the longing to see again rose in him in a tidal wave of anguish, swamping everything else. A good deal of the time he was quite unable to accept that he was doomed to live in darkness and silence for the rest of his life; his sight, at least, must be restored to him. It must happen because it was completely intolerable that

it shouldn't. There were the times when the relentless facts were faced, mostly in the nights, before sleep brought relief from despair. Then there was the descent into the bottomless abyss. Sometimes the facts were faced with acceptance, or something near it, but always at the back of the surface acceptance there was the tenuous yet persistent hope.

He did not speak again whilst they were on deck, only stood with his eager face lifted to the sun, and feeling the ship throbbing its way into the harbour. Maureen would be waiting with her open car; he would sit in front with her, as on that last drive from Colinstown, and they would feel the wind in their faces as then.

They were given priority and escorted down the gangplank and through the Customs by the purser, ahead of the other passengers, and when they emerged from the Customs Maureen rushed forward to meet them. Gavin felt the brush of her lips and hair against his cheek and the grip of both her hands on his.

'Maureen!' he cried, exultantly. 'Don't leave me! Hold my hand all the time! I feel as though I could never let you go! No need to introduce you and Laurence. Did you see me on television last night? Did I come over all right?'

She pressed his hand in assent, then Laurence took his hand to say, 'Don't let's talk here. Too many people. Let's get to the car.'

Maureen put her arm through Gavin's, her hand still clasping his. He felt the soft pressure of her breast against his side, and his blood quickened. It was the first time he had reacted to her in this way and it startled and disturbed him, but pleasurably, adding to his elation.

Laurence's reaction to the Irish girl was one of sheer astonishment that any human face that was not the face of a child should convey such innocence. The candour of the blue eyes was the frankness not of worldly knowledge but of the total lack of it. It was as though life had not yet touched her at any point. Or only as it touches a child, innocent of desire, remorse, bitterness—of all the more searing emotions.

They walked away from the quayside and he was vaguely aware of her asking him the usual questions about the journey,

the crossing, whether they had breakfasted, whether it was his first visit to Ireland, to all of which he replied briefly, uncommunicatively, throwing up barriers against any invasion of his private world. It was important to establish from the outset that he was not to be drawn at any point, however innocently.

She thought, simply, 'He's dark,' and it didn't occur to her to wonder why; some people simply were dark ones; it was their nature, just as it was the nature of others to be open and free. The dark ones kept you at a distance, and there was nothing you could do about it. This Laurence Oakes was a good and faithful friend to Gavin, and that was all that mattered.

When they came to the car she asked him, 'Will you say to Gavin for me, please, that it's the same car and that everything is the same, including *Kathleen*.' She added, smiling, 'That's our sailing-dinghy. We'll have good times just as in the past, tell him.'

She watched, fascinated, whilst Laurence told Gavin this in the hand language.

'I'd like to learn to talk to Gavin like that,' she said.

He told her, 'You can learn the alphabet in ten minutes. Speed is a matter of practice.'

Gavin was saying, eagerly, that he would like to ride again and asking if Moriarty's still had that little cob, Patsy.

'Tell him yes,' Maureen asked Gavin.

He told her, 'You can tell him yourself. Two taps at the base of the thumb.' He demonstrated on his own hand.

Maureen answered Gavin and he exclaimed laughingly at her knowledge of the hand-language; then they got into the car, all three sitting in front, Laurence next to Maureen for greater facility in talking on Gavin's left hand.

Gavin demanded to know all the time where they were and there was little opportunity for the other two to talk; but Maureen did manage to tell Laurence that her grandparents were nervous about the visit, because of the difficulties of communicating with Gavin, and because he was accompanied by someone who was a stranger to them.

'You mean they're all set to dislike me?'

'Oh, *no*! They're the most warm-hearted people. But they're

just not used to strangers. The world for them is just the family. If you admire Grandma's Georgian silver and Grandpa's roses they'll make you an honorary member of the family at once!

'What does he do?'

'Grandpa? Do? Oh, just potter about the garden and goes into Dublin for events like the Spring Fair and the Horse Show.'

'I mean for a living.'

'Well, nothing, really. He was an architect when he was young—in a way he still is, as the firm still exists, but he hasn't been active in it for years—not since before the war. He came into some money when his father died.'

'Have you a job?'

'Not a proper one. I was never trained for anything. For a few years I worked at a riding-stables. I still help out there at weekends when they're busy. I used to think I'd like to be a vet but no one was enthusiastic about the idea and somehow I drifted.'

'Don't you get bored?'

'Oh no. In the summer there are all the open-air things, and in the winter there's plenty on in Dublin—dances and plays and cocktail parties.' She hesitated, then added, '*You* lead such a useful life, working at the hospital and looking after Gavin and only two weeks' holiday in the whole year—my life must sound terribly trivial and empty to you.'

The question went unanswered because Gavin felt the car climbing and demanded to know whether they were in Dalkey and going up to the Vico Road; the whole conversation had been conducted spasmodically, punctuated by Gavin's eager questions and the pauses for Laurence to spell out the answers given him by the girl.

He was relieved to be able to evade comment on her life. He felt he knew this comfortable parasitical middle-class world, inhabited by pleasant, well-mannered people totally lacking in social conscience; knew it by looking in on it through its tastefully curtained windows and walking its well-kept streets; he had even met some of its inhabitants—as patients at the hospital, vehemently opposed to the Welfare State as the thin end of the wedge of socialism, but determined to benefit by it. These Anglo-Irish

Edwards, with their Georgian silver and their passion for horses, would be only another aspect of that world.

Maureen halted the car on the Vico Road looking out over the bay for him to admire the view. She pointed out the Villa Napoli down below, white and Italianate with its green shutters and its pines leaning to the sea.

He told Gavin, 'We're now looking down on the Villa Napoli. I feel there should be olive trees in the garden and mimosa!'

'There's a big old eucalyptus tree,' Gavin told him, proudly, and then the anguished cry he so often uttered, 'Oh, I wish I could see it! I want to see it!'

The girl looked at Laurence, her bright face darkened with pity.

'It's too awful! He's not reconciled yet, is he?'

'Not all the time. None of them are. But pity doesn't help.'

'What does?'

'Contact. They need it all the time. Just the physical contact of a hand, even when the fingers aren't talking. The moment you let go they're sealed off again in darkness and silence.'

Maurcen started the car up again and they drove down the hill and entered the drive of the Villa Napoli, shady with shrubs and tall trees. There was the moist smell of moss and ferns and then, as the car turned into the sunlight at the gable of the house, the scent of late honeysuckle. They got out of the car and Gavin groped his way to the wall and felt for the blossom.

Laurence was aware of two figures, a man and a woman, advancing from the terrace in front of the house, a tall, thin, slightly stooping elderly man wearing a sagging tweed jacket, muddy corduroy trousers, and a fisherman's hat, and a small, upright, greyhaired woman in a faded cotton dress and shapeless black cardigan. The man wore heavy brown shoes, muddy and with knotted laces, and the appearance of not having been cleaned for years, the woman curiously girlish sandals which had once been coloured but were now faded and broken. The man clumped and the woman shuffled. When they came closer Laurence was aware of the bright blueness of the man's eyes set in a red weather-beaten face, and the remnants of good looks; the woman looked

faded and tired, as though she had never been able to keep up with her husband's vitality and had long ago given up trying.

Maureen effected the introductions and the routine questions and answers concerning the journey were asked and given. Then Mrs. Edwards went over to her grandson, took his hand and wrote in block capitals in the palm, 'Welcome home!'

'Grandma!' he exclaimed, and flung his arms round her. 'I've got a wonderful machine like a typewriter—you'll both be able to talk to me quite easily!' he shouted, excitedly.

His grandfather went over to him and took his hand and shook it, then turned embarrassed to Laurence.

'I'd like to say something to him, but I can't get on with his hand writing. Could you say welcome back for me?'

Laurence took Gavin's hand and told him, 'Your grandfather says welcome back and wishes he could talk to you. You must introduce him to the Arcaid.'

They went into the house, Maureen taking Gavin's arm and twining her fingers with his. The familiar smell of the house came to him, the smell of old furniture, of pot-pourri, of linen laid in lavender; a musky smell that emanated from the walls and filled the house with a living presence. Waves of pure happiness rose in him and washed over him, and the face he turned to Maureen was radiant.

'I'm so happy to be back,' he cried. 'I can't tell you!'

She pressed his hand, responsively, then wrote in the palm, 'I am glad too.'

They were mounting the stairs to the room he and Laurence were to share, the room in which he had seen his last sight, the night glimmer of the sea, and heard his last sound, the cry of the owl. Mrs. Edwards went ahead of them to open up the room, tug at a curtain, smooth a bedspread. Behind them came Laurence, carrying the suitcases, and Grandpa Edwards bringing up the rear and conversationally groping for points of contact.

'Gavin wrote us you're handy in a boat,' he said, hopefully.

'Fairly. I'm good if anyone goes overboard. I've had medals for life-saving.'

'Is that so?' Mr. Edwards was impressed.

It was not so, but he did know how to do it and had done it more than once and considered that if medals were to be given he should have had one.

'You're a strong swimmer, I take it?' Mr. Edwards continued.

'I am, rather. I'd have made a good pearl diver—I can stay under a long time. When I was young and liked showing-off I used to do a trick at the swimming-baths—going in at one end with a lighted cigarette and coming up at the other end smoking it. It made an impression at regattas.'

Maureen who had overheard this turned round from the top of the stairs.

'What was the trick?'

'Turning the cigarette round in your mouth so that the lighted end was turned to your throat. You fill your lungs with air first, of course—enough for the trip. I'll teach you if you like.'

He smiled, and she said, 'You ought to smile oftener—it suits you!'

'The life I lead isn't conducive.'

They came into a room with windows in two walls, looking one way out to sea across the bay, the other along the coast to the mountains.

'This was always Gavin's room,' Mrs. Edwards was saying.

Laurence took Gavin's hand.

'Back in your old room,' he told him.

'Where I last saw and heard. It's been dark and silent for more than a year now.'

Mrs. Edwards looked unhappily from her grandson to Laurence.

'Poor boy! If only a miracle would happen! Do you believe in miracles, Mr. Oakes?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'As Christians we're taught to believe that with God all things are possible.'

'We don't all go on believing the things we're taught to believe.'

Mrs. Edwards looked startled. Mr. Edwards mumbled that he

would go and see about breakfast—'These two lads must be killed with the hunger!'

'I could eat,' Laurence admitted. 'We only had a cup of tea on the boat.'

The Edwards trooped out and soon a smell of frying eggs and bacon seeped up the stairs. Gavin turned away from the window at which he had been standing savouring the sea air and the scent of roses.

'Let's go,' he said, cheerfully. 'I smell breakfast.'

As they descended the stairs he asked, 'I hope you like it here—in my home?'

'It's beautiful,' Laurence told him.

He thought: But it's not going to be easy.

IT WAS not easy for anyone. For Gavin because he longed to see all that he knew to be there and could now know only by touch, and because of the frustration in communication—his grandfather laboriously tapping out trite questions and trivial remarks on the Arcaid—‘How does it feel to be back?’ and ‘You’ve grown since you were last here!’—and his grandmother still printing in block capitals in the palm of his hand, unable to cope with either the machine or the finger-alphabet, and Maureen determinedly talking to him manually, with Laurence’s help, frustratingly slowly, all of them desperately thinking of things to say, the sheer physical laboriousness of communication robbing conversation of all spontaneity. Early in the first day the grandparents gave up and decided that it was easier to ask Laurence to convey to Gavin whatever they found to say to him. Maureen persisted in manual conversation when Laurence was there to help, and resorted to the machine when she found herself alone with Gavin. They took the machine everywhere with them—in the garden, down to the beach, in the boat. But manually or with the machine the process of communication was frustratingly laborious.

She envied Laurence his manual speed. ‘When you talk to Gavin it all looks so quick and easy,’ she told him, adding, ‘But it’s not as quick as ordinary conversation, is it? Even with abbreviations?’

‘No, it can’t be. It takes patience—on both sides. But the deaf-blind have patience—there’s no time in their world.’

She was puzzled.

‘Gavin has a Braille watch.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

She waited for him to explain but he felt explanation to be

futile. Even between the sighted and the hearing who spoke the same language there could be difficulties of communication, he reflected. More communication was possible between him and the girl than with her grandparents, but it was little enough. He didn't mind her; she had warmth and naturalness, and was without guile—that terrible female guile which caused him to shrink back into himself; but she was as essentially alien to him as her grandparents. They had lost three sons, all their sons; they had suffered; but it was a suffering with which he could not identify himself; it was the suffering of creatures inhabiting a world outside of his experience. He moved temporarily in that world but made no contact with it. He felt as alien in it and as hostile to it as he had felt in his brief contacts with James Hayton's world. They were all, one way and another, the enemy, all part of the establishment—in which he himself had no part.

Mrs. Edwards asked him, at the end of the first evening, 'Will you be coming with us to church in the morning, Mr. Oakes?'

He told her no, that he had no religious belief of any kind.

There was again the startled look.

'You mean you're an atheist?'

'Yes.'

'How very extraordinary!'

'To me it's the theists who are extraordinary—in this day and age.'

She found his thin smile disconcerting. He really was a very extraordinary creature. She wondered, vaguely, if he was a Communist, no other explanation being possible, and if he was really a suitable person to be Gavin's companion. Yet Gavin seemed so fond of him, and it had to be admitted that he was very patient with the poor boy.

'Gavin likes to go to church when he is with us,' she continued. 'How will he manage without you?'

'Maureen can speak well enough manually to convey to him when to stand and sit and kneel. But I'll ask him how he feels about it. I'm not sure he'll want to go to church. He's gone off God since he became deaf-blind.'

'Gone off God?'

'Yes. Haven't you read his poems?'

She replied, stiffly, 'I don't read poetry. My husband read them and didn't care for them. Though of course we're both glad the poor boy has this hobby and that he was taken up by TV. You see all kinds of people on TV. It's wonderful, really.'

Gavin was in the garden with Maureen when this conversation took place, and after Mrs. Edwards had paid tribute to the wonders of television Laurence excused himself saying he would go and find Gavin and ask him about church tomorrow.

He found Gavin and Maureen in the rose-garden, sitting on a wall, the Arcaid between them. From a distance he saw that they were laughing, Maureen as she tapped out what she wanted to say, Gavin as he listened with his fingers.

When she became aware of Laurence approaching, Maureen told Gavin on the machine, then waited for him to come up with them.

At the familiar touch on his shoulder Gavin smiled.

'Maureen is getting very quick on the Arcaid,' he said, happily. 'We've been having a great talk. I wish Grandma would learn to use it.'

Laurence took the boy's hand to tell him, 'Your grandmother wants to know if you are going to church tomorrow.'

'I always do go when I'm here. It pleases them.'

'Are you talking about going to church tomorrow?' Maureen asked.

Laurence nodded, and told Gavin, 'If you go I'll stay here and have a swim.'

'O.K. But I think I'd like to go. I'll miss not seeing the flowers on the altar and the stained-glass window behind and the big brass eagle holding up the Bible for the lessons, but it'll all smell the same, and there'll be the feeling of the people all round in their best clothes.'

Laurence asked him, 'Where does God come into it?'

Gavin laughed. 'I don't know. Perhaps not at all for me any more. I'd like to go, all the same.'

Laurence pressed his hand in the agreed assent sign, then said, 'We'd better go in. It's getting dark, and a bit cold.'

'Is there an owl calling?'

'No. Just a few bats pip-squeaking.'

Gavin stood up and reached out a hand to Maureen.

'I'll take the machine,' Laurence said.

They walked back to the house, Gavin and Maureen close together, Laurence a little apart, carrying the Arcaid. He observed that the rapt look on Gavin's face was not reflected on Maureen's; she might have been bringing a small boy home from school.

At the house she asked Laurence, 'Are you coming to church with us in the morning?'

'No. I'm an outsider in religion as in all else.'

'How do you mean—an outsider?'

'I was born that way. Outside the establishment. Illegitimate. Father unknown. Institution-reared. Chip on the shoulder.'

'I see.'

He smiled his thin smile.

'You don't, you know. You couldn't possibly.'

She tossed her head.

'You think we're all horribly middle class and conventional, I suppose?'

'I wouldn't know. You're off my beat.'

'What is your beat?'

'Places you wouldn't know—Borstal, Scrubs, Wandsworth, Brixton.'

'I don't know England.'

'It would be all the same if you did.'

Gavin stumbled against the bottom step of the terrace and demanded, irritably, to know where they'd got to.

'Nobody tells me anything,' he complained, fretfully.

Laurence took his hand and told him they had reached the terrace, and added, 'I suggest we don't sit up any longer with the family but go to our room. I'm tired.'

'I'm tired, too,' Gavin said.

Laurence told the girl, 'We're both tired. We'll go straight up, not sit around any longer. By the way, it would be better if you didn't tell your grandparents about my beat! It might worry them.'

'I've already forgotten it.' She added, 'We can take the boat out tomorrow afternoon if you like.'

'I would like—very much. In return I'll demonstrate the underwater swimming trick with the cigarette.'

She laughed. 'You're an odd one. I can't make you out at all. Dark, we call it over here. I think I'll call you Sphinx!'

'I can't prevent you.'

There was an edge to his voice, but it was lost on her. She was a little stirred and excited, though she could not have said why. She was aware of his thin face, of the scar on the right cheek still visible in the dusk, of the unsmiling mouth. Of his physical closeness that seemed only to emphasize the remoteness of his inward self. She was in the grip of a fantasy in which he put his arms round her and kissed her, and suggested to her that when he had taken Gavin to his room he would come back and they would walk down to the beach together. She was suffused by an almost unbearable longing. Say it! she willed him, say it!

But he had nothing more to say to her, and they went into the lighted house, where chairs were drawn up in front of the television set and a teapot muffled in a knitted cosy stood with cups and saucers on a trolley which had been wheeled in from the kitchen. The nightly ritual was about to begin.

The Edwards' existence at the Villa Napoli was sustained with the help of a seedy middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Payne, imported from Dublin during the past twelve months. Until their advent there had been a series of young females always individually referred to as 'The Girl'. She 'lived in' in a room over the garage and never stayed longer than it took her to save her fare to England, except for one who stayed a little longer because she was saving her air-fare to America. There was always a different girl every time Gavin visited there, as far back as he could remember, and his grandmother always believing that this one, the current one, would stay. They were not all Protestants, by any means, though Mrs. Edwards preferred that her domestic help should be Church of Ireland, but with England the high-wage-powered magnet that it was she couldn't be choosy, and several times she had had to

endure the sight of a crucifix hung over The Girl's bed. The Paynes' predecessor had been Catholic, with a great devotion to the rosary and the Sacred Heart, though this had not prevented her hurrying to take advantage of the Welfare State in 'pagan England' when the result of one frolic too many among the bracken on the Killiney hillsides began to be evident. Of this Mrs. Edwards knew nothing—any more than the girl's intensely respectable and religiously devout family in an obscure village away in the county Kildare.

An advertisement for one more girl produced Mr. and Mrs. Payne, Protestant and respectable, with testimonials to prove both. Fred Payne had retired from a small sweetshop-tobacconist's, sold up, lock, stock and barrel, he declared, and all they sought now was a home for their declining years, in return for their combined services. Mrs. Payne could cook, and Fred could drive a car and knew a bit about gardening. This time Mrs. Edwards was sure she had solved her domestic problems for good, and in a far, far better way than she had ever done before. It momentarily crossed her mind to wonder why the Paynes hadn't bought a little house or cottage with the proceeds of the sale of their shop when they retired, but she was too relieved to have acquired their services to give it more than a passing thought.

The truth was that the Paynes had not so much retired from their shop as been put out of it—lock, stock and barrel; the proceeds from the sale of the stock had been swallowed up in a settlement out of court. They had occupied the ground-floor of ramshackle Georgian house just outside Dublin and Fred had been employed by the Dublin Corporation in a menial clerical capacity. One day it had occurred to him that one wall of the derelict garden flanked a busy road in which, because of many such walls bounding such demesnes—walls built by the gentry during the Hungry 'Forties to give employment—there was not a single shop. At one point the wall was breached; it wanted only a window set into it, and a shed knocked up behind, and you had a rent-free shop. Mr. Payne had cherished this idea for many years before he had finally been able to scrape enough money together to put it into action. For six months the shop had prospered and its proprietor had

continued to pay the rent for his flat to the owners' solicitors as he had for years. It was just bad luck that one day out of the blue—the American blue—the owner had come to life and decided to inspect his Dublin property. He gave Mr. Payne no credit for his enterprise; he only gave him a month to pay the rent for the shop he had had no right to build—and in which he was just developing a nice business in ice-cream, and was planning to include a few handy groceries—and get out. In desperation Fred consulted a solicitor, who exchanged letters with the landlord's solicitors, and the matter never reached the courts. All was amicably settled, and Fred and Maggie were homeless and destitute. Maggie swore it was her guardian angel who directed her to the issue of the *Irish Times* containing Mrs. Edwards's advertisement for resident domestic help.

Fred soon made the room over the garage into two, imported several odds and ends saved from the wreck, and the two of them settled in. Fred demonstrated his ability to make what he called a 'good Protestant job' of everything he did about the house and garden—and the more makeshift it was the greater his Protestant pride in it—and Maggie industriously swept the dust under the rugs, made the kitchen floor very wet once a week, baked soda-bread, and barmbrack thick with sultanas, and learned to abandon the frying-pan in favour of the grill. Both Paynes were easy-going and good-natured and adept at finding the quick and easy way. Fred was a skinny, chirpy little man, Maggie plump and garrulous; both had a great desire to please, but with words rather than actions. Nothing was too much trouble for them, verbally, but action was something to be reduced to the minimum. Fred was always cheerfully willing to mend a broken window-sash; it involved taking the window out and was a tedious business, but sure it was no trouble at all; wouldn't we just prop it up now on a stick for the time being? And the time being could be made to last indefinitely. Similarly Maggie never minded doing a bit of washing; sure it was no trouble at all—which was true, since she merely passed it through the water, wrung it out and pegged it out to dry. All that they did—or failed to do—was done, or not done, in the same cheerful, willing, good-natured fashion.

Mrs. Edwards had no illusions about them, though she did not share her grand-daughter's harsh view that they were lazy good-for-nothings; they were very far from being satisfactory, but they were better than nothing. It was nice to have Fred to mow the lawns, drive the car, and clean it; it was something to have liberation from the kitchen sink. You couldn't have everything, and half of even a stale loaf was better than no bread—and these two at least would stay.

They were both very sympathetic to the doubly afflicted grandson, whom they had already been privileged to see on television. They were neither of them sure if they liked his companion; there was something about him . . . he was 'dark'. When he stayed behind when Fred drove the others off to church Maggie assumed he was Catholic. Or perhaps even a Jew. Further possibilities were beyond her range. She usually went to church with the others on Sunday mornings, but Mrs. Edwards had asked her to stay behind as Mr. Oakes wouldn't be going.

'We can't leave him all alone in the house,' she said, 'when he only arrived yesterday. Fred can take you in for evensong after tea.'

'Sure, ma'am, God'll never miss me missin' the odd Sunday! But what harm if Mr. Oakes does be here alone for an hour?'

'It wouldn't be a polite way of treating a guest newly arrived from England.'

'It's time someone put some manners on *him*, ma'am, if you ask me!'

Mrs. Edwards said, coldly, 'I didn't ask you,' and turned away.

'There's some as wouldn't care to be left alone with a dark one the like of that,' Mrs. Payne persisted, stubbornly.

Mrs. Edwards shook up a cushion in an armchair.

'Are you afraid he might molest you, or what? You're old enough to be his mother!'

'Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, that young man is thirty if he's a day, and I'm not yet forty-five.'

'I can only suggest you lock yourself in your room till we get back!'

Mrs. Edwards marched out. Maggie followed her to the front door. Fred had brought the car round and Maureen and her

grandfather were already inside and Laurence was helping Gavin in. Maggie retreated into the kitchen, from which, with the door slightly ajar, she listened for the return of the dark one into the house. She heard the car drive away but no other sound and concluded he had gone for a stroll in the grounds—perhaps down to the beach; she therefore collected mop, broom, and duster and set off for the dining-room, which at eleven o'clock had still to be cleared of the breakfast things.

It was a long dark room and Laurence standing at the far end gazing into a cabinet did not hear her padding along in her carpet slippers. He did not hear her until she entered the room and set mop and broom down with a clatter.

When he turned she exclaimed, startled, 'Oh, there you are, Mr. Oakes! I thought you were outside somewhere. You gave me quite a turn!'

'I was admiring the Georgian silver. They've quite a collection!'

'They have that.' She advanced towards the cabinet. 'Mr. Edwards picks things up at auctions in Dublin. He's what they call a connoisseur.'

She stopped in front of the cabinet and peered in, standing close to him. He moved slightly. She smelt of furniture polish and sweat, and when she bent forward, so that her head came close to him, her hair smelt strongly of cigarette smoke.

'It seems silly having all this stuff locked away. They never use it. You'd think they'd at least put it out on show on the side-board, wouldn't you? It just comes out two or three times a year for cleaning and then goes back. That little teapot tucked away in the corner's Queen Anne. There's a cream jug to match, just behind—you can hardly see it. They're my favourites, those two.'

He looked where she indicated, and asked, 'Have they ever been burgled?'

'Burgled? Oh, raided. Not that I know of. It's all kept locked up, anyhow.'

'Any burglar worth his salt could pick that lock in a couple of minutes.'

She turned and regarded him quizzically.

'You don't say?'

He moved away.

'I'm going for a swim.'

He stepped out through the French window into the garden. She watched him for a few moments and it suddenly occurred to her that he was not carrying any swimming trunks and towel. It somehow added to his general enormity.

She collected the breakfast things on to a dumb-waiter and wheeled it out into the hall out of the way. Then she swept a little, mopped a little, dusted a little, straightened the chairs. She repeated this operation in the drawing-room, then went upstairs to straighten the beds and give the rooms what she called a cat-lick and a promise. This done she went downstairs and wheeled the dumb-waiter into the kitchen. She pushed it alongside the kitchen table, then stood staring.

In the middle of the table stood the Queen Anne cream-jug.

THE family returned from church with the *Sunday Times*, and the *Sunday Sensation*—the latter for the Paynes, who enjoyed what Fred always cheerfully referred to as the-dirt-'n'-trash.

It was Fred who first alighted upon Kay Carter's piece about the deaf-blind boy-poet. Having put the car away he sat in the kitchen in his shirt-sleeves, with his feet up on a dilapidated sofa, having a preliminary run through the headlines, whilst Maggie was engaged in the steamy process known as 'dishing up' the meal which was dinner for them and luncheon for their employers. He lingered over Kay Carter's Column then suddenly exclaimed, delightedly, 'Will ye listen to this! "Seventeen-year-old deaf-blind poet, Gavin Edwards, who made his second television appearance on Friday night, was all smiles as he left the studios accompanied by his devoted companion, Mr. Laurence Oakes. The occasion was the publication in book form of Gavin's verses which have been appearing in the highbrow Sundays and literary weeklies for the past year. Mr. Oakes, a taciturn middle-aged man with a long scar down his right cheek, refused to co-operate in an interview with the young poet. 'Gavin is a genius even more remarkable than the world-renowned American deaf-blind writer and lecturer, Miss Helen Keller,' he declared, 'and must be protected from the yellow press!' Then with Mr. Maurice Berring, the journalist who had assisted with the television programme, he bore the handsome young poet off to a waiting taxi.'"

Fred looked up over the top of his spectacles and grinned.

'She's not sparing of the compliments!'

'He's arful pretty, there's no denyin',' his wife declared, through the cloud of steam rising from the runner beans she had just tipped into a colander.

Fred read on: ‘“Kay Carter then called on the young poet’s stepfather, Sir James Hayton, in the stately yellow house facing Regent’s Park, one of London’s most elegant residential districts. Sir James is chairman of the powerful engineering enterprise which carries his name. He married Gavin’s pretty young mother, who was formerly his secretary, a few years ago, some twelve months after her first husband, Gavin’s father, Terence Edwards, a well-known newspaper man with a roving commission, dropped dead in Saigon.

“Sir James, however, like Mr. Oakes, refused to be interviewed about the young genius. What the *Sunday Sensation* wants to know is *why the secrecy?* If the young man can appear twice on television answering questions and reading his poems, thereby becoming a public figure, why cannot his public be told something of his background? Who is the dark, scar-faced man who guards the deaf-blind boy in this dragon-like fashion? Why does Sir James refuse to talk? Why this mystery surrounding the young man supposed to be more remarkable even than Helen Keller? The *Sunday Sensation* says we have a right to know!”’

Fred removed his spectacles and folded the paper.

‘The cheek of it!’ he observed, with satisfaction. He added, ‘You’d better take the paper in with the lunch. Maybe they’d like to see it. But don’t let them hang on to it. I hope it don’t spoil their appetites!’

When she had set the roast joint on the table in front of Mr. Edwards Maggie handed the paper to Laurence.

‘There’s a piece in it about you and Master Gavin,’ she told him, and the eyes of the family were immediately turned upon him.

‘In *that* rag?’ Mr. Edwards demanded, incredulously.

Maureen inquired, ‘Did you give them an interview?’

‘Surely not,’ Mrs. Edwards protested, but questioningly.

‘I refused their Miss Carter an interview,’ Laurence said, shortly, and opened the paper. He ran his eyes down the column and his face darkened.

‘The bloody lying bitch!’ he exclaimed.

Maureen looked wildly from Laurence to her grandfather, from her grandfather to her grandmother.

Mrs. Edwards looked alarmed. Mr. Edwards, flustered with consternation and shock, spluttered, 'We don't use that sort of language in this house, Mr. Oaks!'

'I'm sorry,' Laurence said. 'But I am reported as saying something completely idiotic, whereas I didn't in fact say anything at all. And I see they've dragged Sir James Hayton into it.'

Mr. Edwards, more British than the British in his determination not to panic, resolutely sliced beef on to a plate and passed it down the table to his wife.

'What did Sir James tell them?' Mrs. Edwards asked, nervously, helping herself to horseradish sauce.

'The same as I did—nothing! So this bitch—sorry, Miss Carter, tries to build Gavin up as a mystery. My guess is that his nibs will be on the phone tonight in a shouting fury.'

He took Gavin's hand and told him, 'That pink-haired woman who came to the studio has a silly piece in the *Sunday Sensation* today. I'll Braille it for you after lunch. The Boss will be mad as hell.'

'I don't see why anyone should care about a rag like the *Sunday Sensation*,' Gavin said.

'He's right,' Maureen said. 'What does it matter? They don't say anything actually unpleasant, do they?'

'The whole thing is unpleasant. You'd better read it for yourself.'

He handed it to her across the table, and when she had read it she said, 'I think it's just silly.'

She passed it to her grandfather—who drily observed that he disliked newspapers being read at mealtimes and that he would read it later. Conversation lapsed until Maureen revived it by asking Laurence if he had had his swim and was the water cold and did he feel like going in again this afternoon.

When he had read the Kay Carter piece Mr. Edwards declared it beneath contempt. Mrs. Edwards read it and said that she couldn't understand why anyone should bother to write such things. What did they mean about why-the-mystery and what was it to do with the *Sunday Sensation* anyhow? She added that she thought the Haytons would be very annoyed, especially Sir James.

Before they went down to the beach Laurence Brailled the piece for Gavin on the Arcaid tape.

Gavin said gleefully, 'It's all very silly, but it'll make the Boss hopping mad! And she's got it wrong about my father—he died in Djakarta. She evidently doesn't know the difference between Indonesia and Indo-China. That will annoy my mother. Did you really say that about me being more remarkable than Helen Keller?'

'Of course I didn't. I told you at the time—I answered pork-and-greens to everything the silly bitch said. The whole thing is spite.'

Gavin laughed. 'She said I was handsome! But Maurice won't much care for being described as a journalist!'

Laurence was very far from being amused, but he let it go. He was quite sure they had not heard the last of Miss Kay Carter's latest effort.

They changed into swimming trunks and joined Maureen on the terrace, where her grandparents sat in wicker armchairs half dozing over the Sunday culture. She wore an elegant blue-and-white one-piece swim suit which she had on for the first time and was happily self-conscious. The dark suit was very becoming with her red hair and her slender tanned limbs. Slight, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, she was, it came to Laurence, much less feminine undressed than dressed. He thought her attractive in a sexless sort of way. Cool and neat and virginal, her virginity wrapping her round like a cellophane bag, inviting you to look but not touch. She smiled at him, her young body aching for his touch, her whole being consumed with longing for him to be aware of her as a woman. But in the very moment in which his mind registered the fact that she looked well in the dark swim suit she jarred him with the bantering greeting which was her effort to appear casual.

'Here comes the dragon!' she said, and he winced with irritation.

'Let's go,' he said, curtly, and then, 'Take Gavin's arm. I'll bring the oars down.'

He took the boy's hand to say, 'Go with Maureen. I'll follow with the oars.'

Maureen took Gavin's arm and he asked her what her swim suit was like. 'You used to wear a green one,' he added.

She looked appealingly at Laurence.

'You tell him—it's so much quicker!'

'Good practice for you. You can surely spell out blue-and-white on his hand.'

With frequent halts for Maureen to answer Gavin's questions progress across the garden was slow and Laurence got to the beach ahead of them. When they arrived he had pulled the boat in on the pulley and gone aboard and was busy rigging her. Maureen and Gavin waded out to her and clambered aboard.

'We'll row her out a bit,' Laurence said.

'When are you going to do your act?' Maureen demanded.

'My act? Oh, the underwater thing. We'll get out a bit first.'

They disposed themselves in the boat, with Gavin in the stern, and Laurence rowed out. When they were out of the cove he rested on his oars and extracted a cigarette from a packet rolled in his towel, and a box of matches. He lit the cigarette and commanded Maureen to take over the oars. They changed places and Gavin feeling the boat rocking asked what was happening. Laurence took his hand to tell him, 'I'm about to show Maureen my great underwater act. I'm going in over the stern.'

He turned the cigarette round so that the lighted end was in his mouth, filled his lungs with air, and dived. Gavin laughed as he felt the splash.

Laurence swam out a few yards underwater then turned and came up near the boat. He took the cigarette from his mouth and replaced it the right way round, drew on it and blew out smoke to demonstrate that it was still alight. Maureen leaning over the side of the boat laughed delightedly.

'Quite an act!' she called to him.

He swam a few strokes then pulled himself up on board.

'I'll take the oars if you want to go in,' he told her.

She dived in and again Gavin felt the rock of the boat and the splash, then Laurence's wet hand on his knee. He shivered slightly at its touch. The sun was hot on his bare back and the smell of the

sea strong on the wind and he craved to feel the water closing round him.

'I want to go in!' he cried. 'What harm would it do me? It couldn't make me deafer than I am already!'

Laurence told him, 'You would find you had no sense of balance. You would also have fearful pains in the head, even with your ears plugged. All the doctors have said you shouldn't.'

Gavin persisted, 'I could do the breast-stroke and keep my head above water. It couldn't affect my ears then!'

Laurence gave in.

'We'll try it from the beach tomorrow, after I've got some ear-plugs for you. Maureen's coming back now. When she's aboard we'll move out into the wind.'

The boat was no more than a sailing-dinghy, with mainsail and jib, and with the three of them on board there was nothing for Gavin to do except keep out of the way, but he didn't mind; he felt the sun and wind on his face and the movement of the boat, and he knew how it would all look, the blue water with racing scuds of white on it, and the broad sweep of the bay, and the mountains behind.

In his mind, too, he could see the slim figure of Maureen in her dark blue bathing suit with the white piping and her red hair blowing about her face. But Laurence he couldn't see because he knew him only by touch. He had certain images of him in his mind but they were not clear, they had no certainty. He had fantasies of one day opening his eyes and seeing Laurence. He would open his eyes and see Laurence looking at him, the dark hair falling over his brow the way he knew it did fall, and the dark eyes looking directly at him, and he would hear him say—because when he should see again he would hear too—'You see, this is what I am like!' And he would answer, magically, *I see*. But this was the curfew time, when there was neither seeing nor hearing. The curfew which had descended for him at dawn.

He put the thought from him, resolutely. The curfew could not prevent you feeling the sun on your face, on your bare flesh, and the wind whipping through your hair, and the boat dipping and rolling under you, or the imprint on your mind of that

beauty the other side of the double dark. The spirit had its own resilience.

It made him happy when Laurence at one point put the main-sail sheet into his hand; it made him feel on the inside of normal activity. He smelled the cigarette Laurence had lit, and felt his hand for a moment on his knee, establishing contact. His mind held the image of the sail bellowing above him, and of the white V of their wake as they scudded before the wind. It was a grand day for sailing and he ceased wishing he could see it, content to feel it. It even occurred to him that if he could see he would miss a great deal of the sensation of sailing. 'Sensational' reverted to its true meaning.

When they were far out in the bay a sudden squall hit them broadside on; the boat heeled over and but for Laurence's presence of mind they would all three have gone overboard. He brought her over and they sat out on her side to keep her on an even keel. They felt the impact of the open sea now slapping at the bows and Laurence said they should be getting back.

Maureen observed, watching him handling the sheets, 'You're good in a boat. Where did you learn?'

He recognized the question as a probe and answered vaguely that it was a thing boys learned when they lived near a river.

She returned to the attack: 'Are you a Londoner?'

'Born and bred.'

He averted further questioning by handing her the sheet and moving over to talk to Gavin.

They had to tack to get back and it was evening when they finally reached the cove. They were cold and tired and ravenously hungry. It was wonderful to put on warm clothes, drink hot tea, eat toasted scones freshly made by Mrs. Payne, and physically relax. They were still lying in armchairs, wrists dangling, legs thrust out, blood tingling, when the telephone rang, to be answered by Maggie who came into the room to announce that Lady Hayton was on the line for Mr. Oakes.

Laurence heaved himself up out of the chair wishing Lady Hayton at the bottom of the sea. He went into the hall and picked up the receiver and announced himself.

Her voice came clear and girlish from the other side of the Irish Sea.

'Oh, Laurence. Have you seen today's *Sunday Sensation*?'

'Yes. All very silly, but not worth bothering about.'

'Sir James is furious! He seems to think you're to blame.'

'I had nothing to do with it.'

'That Helen Keller piece——'

'You don't really think I said that?'

'Not really, I told my husband so. What exactly *did* you say?'

'I said exactly pork-and-greens.'

'Did you say *pork-and-greens*?'

'Yes. Only that and nothing more. You can tell his nibs so with my compliments.'

'I will, of course. How is Gavin? What sort of weather are you having? It's been a lovely day here. Give my love to Grandma and Grandpa Edwards. I'll meet you at Euston Saturday week. Perhaps we could have lunch together. . . . 'Bye——'

He hung up and was about to return to the drawing-room when Maggie came out of the kitchen.

'Mr. Oakes. Just a minute please.'

He waited whilst she came shuffling along the polished floor to where he stood.

She said in a low voice as she came up with him, 'I put it back. You know. But the lock doesn't work properly now.'

He smiled.

'I'll put it right for you in the morning.'

'You'd better,' she said, and added, darkly, 'Under my supervision.'

GAVIN had no awareness of the Paynes, for they made no attempt to communicate with him. Laurence told him about them, but he was sealed off from them. As he was from the reality of his grandparents. Even when he had been sighted he had never really seen them. They were part of his background, as far back as he could remember. He had always accepted them unquestioningly, uncritically. They were as much part of the Villa Napoli as the smell of old furniture and pot-pourri and the sight and sound of the sea. Had they not been his father's parents, and had he met them in any other setting, he would have found them what they in fact were, narrow and dull—which was how they impressed Laurence. And Vivien—who had never understood how they came to produce a son as intelligent and such good company as Terence.

For Gavin they were romantic figures who ruled over an enchanted kingdom by the sea, and sealed off from them as he now was this image of them was safe from any possibility of change. His grandmother had been the first person to break through the terrifying walls of darkness and silence by writing in the palm of his hand and it had intensified his devotion to her. The touch of her dry thin fingers filled him with the warmth of affection and gratitude, and laborious as was her method of communication, drawing capital letters in his palm, this contact meant very much more to him than his grandfather's attempts at conversation tapped out on the machine. He valued the machine; it had great uses, but it could never be a substitute for human contact. The thought was not new to him, but the touch of his grandmother's and Maureen's hands underlined it for him.

Maureen's hands gave him a special pleasure because although

he had never kissed her, except in the briefest and most cousinly way, he had a romantic notion of her as his 'girl'. At times, when she was near him, his blindness tormented him almost unbearably in the intensity of his longing to see her and he would cry out this longing to her. She would soothe him, then, by taking his hand and telling him on it what she was wearing, slacks and sweater, blouse and skirt, dress, the colours of each garment, the colour of her lipstick—anything and everything which would enable him to see her in his mind, and the anguish of frustration would leave him. In a few days she had worked up a fair speed in the hand-language, but conversation which entailed spelling out every letter, however rapidly, still seemed to her laborious and, after a time, a strain. She used the machine a great deal, making the excuse to Gavin that it was so much quicker and easier. He himself was tireless; the time had long gone by when he found manual conversation a strain because of the concentration it entailed. It was only with his mother that he found it a strain and an effort.

Laurence kept his word and bought him ear-plugs and took him swimming. When he waded in Gavin enjoyed the feeling of the water on his body, but when he began to swim confusion overcame him. He discovered that he had no sense of direction, and with it a terrifying sensation of being completely sealed in darkness and silence. He panicked and shouted to Laurence, who immediately grabbed him and propelled him ashore.

Then he sat on the sand gasping, laughing shakily, ashamed of his panic, yet immensely glad to be back in an element he had learned how to cope with, the solid earth under him, Laurence's hand gripping his.

'You're right,' he said. 'It doesn't work—no sense of balance. Anyhow if I can't swim the way I used to, overarm, I'd rather not.'

After that he lay about at the water's edge in the little cove and let the waves wash round him, and Laurence and Maureen swam together and he thought of them coming up out of the water like seals to find him, to repeat, over and over, the reassurance of their presence.

He was the happiest of the three. Laurence was bored a good

deal of the time; the mealtimes he found all but intolerable and but for Gavin would have asked to be allowed to eat in the kitchen with the Paynes. People like the Edwards baffled him by their complacency, their calm assumption that the stresses and strains of the external world were nothing to do with them—though a world war had taken one of their sons. Yet even that, like the death of their last son, Terence, had happened as it were off-stage and the tragedy came to them relayed from a distance, from an outside world with which they were dissociated. They had never gone further afield than Italy, in their pre-war forays upon the Continent; now they never went further than Dublin, and that only twice a year, for the Spring Show and the Horse Show. Even the presence of their deaf-blind grandson did not greatly impinge upon their bounded and orderly world, Laurence felt. Even the Paynes had reality for them only as servants; there was a careful avoidance of any involvement with them as fellow human beings. He felt that after a week in the house he knew more about Maggie and Fred than the Edwards would know in twenty years.

He enjoyed the swimming and sailing in the Bay, and derived pleasure from Gavin's evident happiness in being in the place that was home for him, yet when they turned the corner into the second week he had a sense of relief. Five more breakfasts, five more lunches, five more dinners; fifteen more sessions at the mahogany table in the airless dining-room in which the windows were never opened except very briefly in the mornings when Maggie was 'doing' the room. Fifteen more sessions before bedtime—at ten o'clock—in the equally airless drawing-room, with the blue screen of the television flickering away in the corner and Grandpa Edwards dozing in front of it, and Mrs. Edwards behaving as though it were not there. Fifteen worked off at the rate of three a day was not so many. Then escape back across the sea to the Devon hill-top house, the hospital routine, and the peace of a blessed anonymity.

He was aware of the attraction he had for Maureen, and sometimes he felt sorry for her and at other times it got on his nerves. He resented her curiosity about him, although he recognized that it was natural, since human beings are naturally curious about

each other. When she called him Dragon and Sphinx, girlishly bantering, he would be irritated almost to the point of telling her things about himself which would shatter her romantic yearnings, drive her from him in horror . . . or would they? She wouldn't understand—any more than she had understood his brutal description of his 'beat'; or in her innocence, would refuse to believe.

Even if he could persuade her that he was as queer as a coot, he thought, wily, between pity and impatience, she'd no doubt believe that love and understanding would change all that. It was, he acknowledged, very bad luck on her, but there was nothing he could do about it. Once a woman had made up her mind she loved a man nothing, it seemed, would stop her; but nothing.

Maureen, when the first week turned the corner into the second, with only five days more to go before Laurence and Gavin would sail back to England, experienced an emotional confusion of relief and despair. Her affection for Gavin was as warm and deep as ever, but he still seemed no more than a boy to her, and almost a brother, since they had known each other as far back as they could both remember. Whereas Laurence was a man, and all the more interesting for being strange and 'difficult'. He was older than any of the young men she knew—she judged him to be about forty—but older in more than years.

She speculated endlessly about him, longing to round out the picture from his tersely thrown out intimations of squalid and unhappy childhood and adolescence. Intimations, even, of crime—though she was not quite sure about this, and it might have been, she thought, a kind of bitter bravado. That there was bitterness in him she was sure. He never seemed to smile, or almost never, except when talking to Gavin—who could only sense the smile. There was always a great gentleness on his face when he looked at Gavin, she had noticed, and nothing, clearly, was too much trouble for him where Gavin was concerned. When they were sailing he would spell out to him on his hand what the sea looked like, the landmarks they passed. 'I must just tell Gavin,' he would say, endlessly. Walking he would pull a rose down for Gavin to smell, put a shell into his hand for him to feel, bring him a trail of sea-

weed, halt the walk to tell him, letter by letter, about the bracken on the hillsides, the shadows on the sea.

She said once, 'I think you really love Gavin!'

He replied, curtly, 'Any good nurse would do as much for a patient.'

She wanted to retort, 'The nurse-patient relationship doesn't exist between you and Gavin. He doesn't need a nurse. He needs a friend, someone to care about him, and he has that in you. But love is a word you're frightened of—love of any kind!'

But she feared another snub and said nothing.

She went riding several times, part of herself relieved to be away from that baffling presence, and another part of herself longing to get back—to resume the torment. When he came into a room where she was her heart quickened with happiness; when he left the room it seemed empty past belief and she ached for his return. When he helped her on with a coat or cardigan she would have the sensation of her blood singing with his proximity and know a wild desire to turn and fling herself into his arms. She told herself it was ridiculous to feel like this over anyone so dark and difficult, anyone so completely indifferent to her, but however ridiculous, the disturbing fact remained—along with the fact that she had never felt like this about anyone else.

Gavin said several times that he would like to ride before leaving Killiney, but as Laurence was not keen on the idea, not riding himself and feeling that it was too great a responsibility to impose on Maureen, nothing was done about it. On the last day of the holiday, however, Gavin begged so much to be taken, pleading that in England he had no one to ride with and that this was his last chance, that Laurence gave in, on condition that Maureen promised to keep his horse on a leading rein with hers. Maureen assured him that she would of course do this, that she would not dream of allowing him to ride alone, and that she would see that he had a very quiet horse. She telephoned the stables and made the arrangements. Laurence saw them off in the car, then walked down into Dalkey and boarded a bus for Dublin.

LAURENCE had been in Dublin before and knew his way about. He knew the back streets and the side streets better than the main streets. He knew the slums and the street-markets and the frowsy 'lounges' and the squalid pubs, with their cubby-holes of 'snugs'. He knew the bars; the smart ones and the dingy ones, the amusing ones where smart Dubliners and the intelligentsia, and the visiting English and Americans and the resident Germans, drank short drinks and behaved rather as though they were at a private party, and the dark and smoky bars where men leaned on the counter and picked confused political quarrels with each other and poured porter into themselves until their back teeth were awash.

He got off the bus at Trinity College and strolled down Westmorland Street and over the O'Connell Bridge to O'Connell Street, the 'street of the adulterers', with Parnell at one end and Dan O'Connell at the other and Nelson in the middle. At the historic post-office he turned and walked back to the bridge, slowly enjoying the sense of freedom, grateful for the smell of the sea blowing up the Liffey, and for the glimpse of dark blue mountains at the city's edge. He made his way up Grafton Street, past the expensive shops, and gave a rascally looking fiddler scraping out a jig in the gutter half-a-crown because the noise he made was gay and even rascally men must eat, and turned into a side street looking for a bar he remembered as one which admitted the light of day and where it was possible to get a snack—since he had no intention of returning to Killiney for lunch.

The bar was fairly full, but someone left a corner as he entered and he moved in, between a young couple engrossed in each other, and a pair of seedy-looking middle-aged men engrossed in

carefully transferring bottles of sherry, whisky, brandy, from one paper carrier to another. A waiter in a grubby white jacket stood by them making jocular remarks. Laurence finally succeeded in attracting the waiter's attention to himself and ordered stout and sandwiches. Whilst waiting he watched, fascinated, the two men disposing their bottles in the two carriers, arranging and rearranging with the utmost solemnity. The man nearest him looked up and catching Laurence's eye smiled a little self-consciously and observed that with such a precious cargo you couldn't be too careful about transport. He spoke with a Dublin inflection.

'Indeed not,' Laurence agreed. 'Nice bit of shopping you've got there,' he added, as a bottle of Courvoisier was laid carefully in a carrier beside a bottle of Irish.

The man at the other side of the table gave a wheezy chuckle. He wore a fisherman's hat with a small blue-and-red feather tucked into the band. He had a very red face and an alcoholic nose.

'When you live out in the country you have to lay in supplies,' he said, in an English voice.

The other man turned to Laurence with a curiously bland expression.

'From my English friend's remark,' he said, 'you might form the impression that here are two chaps stocking up for a lost weekend. I assure you that the bulk of these supplies are for our Aunt Hester.'

'Yes?' Laurence said, counting out money for the waiter who had set his order in front of him.

'Oh, my goodness, yes,' the bland one assured him.

The red-faced one wheezed again.

'Our Aunt Hester's a terror,' he said.

'We ourselves,' said the other man, 'would prefer a cup of tea any time. Despite the fact,' he continued, firmly, 'that we have both spent many years in the Ah countries. Have you ever been in the Ah countries?'

'Not to my knowledge,' Laurence said.

'Indiah, Burmah, Africah,' the bland one explained.

'No,' Laurence said. 'My beat was Borstal and the Scrubbs.'

'You surprise me. Is it true that Borstal has as long a waiting-list

as Eton? But the question is rhetorical. I fear we must be going. Our Aunt Hester, you know. Otherwise we should be delighted to invite an old Borstalian to take a chota-peg with us.'

He rose, heavily, gathering up the paper-carrier and tucking it under his arm.

'I see you are drinking the black Protestant drink,' he said. 'Does it not seem ironic to you,' he continued, 'that in this heavily Catholic country the national drink should be a Protestant brew? But again the question is rhetorical. Are you ready, George?'

George heaved himself to his feet. The bottles in his carrier clanked as he lifted it. He eased himself out between bench and table and lurched a little as he stood.

'Delighted to have met you,' he murmured.

'Old-world English courtesy,' the other one observed as he also eased himself out into the open. 'The authentic Poona touch. Once a sahib always a sahib. Good day to you, and my regards to the old Borstalians.'

'Remember me to your Aunt Hester,' Laurence said.

'I will indeed,' the other returned, warmly.

They moved heavily towards the door on to the street, held open for them by the grubby waiter, still grinning like the Cheshire cat.

Laurence caught the waiter's eye and had leaned back in his corner and was relaxing with a large neat whisky when he saw Kay Carter, bearing down on him as she had borne down on him at the television studios.

'Well,' she cried, 'look who's here!'

She dropped down on the bench beside him, in the place vacated by the man from the Ah countries.

'Where's the boy friend?' she demanded.

'Pork-and-greens,' he said.

'Oh, come off it! That line didn't do much for you before, did it? I'm an adept at making bricks without straw. I hope you liked my last bit of homework?'

'I thought it stank. We all did!'

She laughed.

'It was meant to. Where are you staying?'

'You don't really think I'd tell you, do you?'

He swallowed the rest of his drink and got up.

'Not really. But it shouldn't be too difficult to find out.'

'The Haytons won't tell you, if that's what you're thinking.'

'I'm not as naive as that!'

'Anyhow Gavin isn't with me.'

She smiled, extracting cigarette-case and lighter from her handbag.

'I'd have to check on that.'

He stood looking down at her.

'Did anyone ever tell you you were a murderess?'

She lit a cigarette before answering, then blew the smoke in his direction.

'Not in so many words.'

'I'm telling you now.'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

She got up and pushed past him to the bar and climbed up on to a stool, where she sat with her back to him.

He went out into the narrow street. The sunlight no longer danced with the rascally man's jig. At the corner of the street an evil-smelling gipsy woman importuned with a withered sprig of white heather.

'For the love of God, mister . . . five little children . . . and me man in the infirmary down in Kilroe . . . give me something for the little children, mister . . .'

He almost mowed her down in his furious desire to get away from her, beyond reach of the smell of her and her wheedling whine. All the hate and disgust raging in him was projected upon her. He could have struck her down with his fist as his impulse had been to strike down that other one—who smelt of expensive perfume and whose importuning was coolly insolent.

He strode back down Grafton Street to Trinity College and took the bus back to Dalkey. If that bitch was going to find her way to the Villa Napoli he had to be there.

He found Gavin elated with the success of his ride and quite incapable of sharing his perturbation over Kay Carter's presence in

Dublin. On a horse he had not known the lack of sense of balance he had found so confusing when he had tried to swim and which Laurence had feared for him. He had felt quite confident as he had placed his foot in the stirrup Maureen held for him and climbed up into the saddle, and the warm smell of the horses, and the feel of a horse under him again had exhilarated him. He had found it more exhilarating than sailing, because it was more personal participation in what was happening; he had complete control over the horse's movements. He had been happy, too, in the awareness of Maureen at his side, of sharing the same rhythm when they broke into a canter. Several times she had reined in to tell him on his hand where they were, and there had been the sun on his face and the smell of crushed bracken and trampled heather. He wanted to tell Laurence about it, but Laurence seemed only interested in his meeting with Kay Carter in the Dublin bar.

'What does it matter if she does come here?' Gavin demanded. 'We needn't see her. Mrs. Payne can send her packing.'

'Mrs. Payne would gossip to her. She would get a story out of her in no time.'

'Who cares?' Gavin persisted, stubbornly.

'I care!' Laurence said, violently, but not on Gavin's hand. He said it aloud to Maureen—who defended Gavin.

'Why should you worry about a rubbishy English journalist?' she asked. 'You're leaving here tomorrow and what does it matter if she finds her way here when you're gone? No one is going to tell her anything. There isn't anything to tell, anyhow!' She laughed and leaned back in her chair, thrusting her legs in their riding boots out in front of her, relaxing after two hours of riding over rough country. 'There's nothing we could tell about you,' she added, 'for we don't know anything. You're the same Sphinx as when you arrived a fortnight ago!'

He answered, curtly, 'You under-estimate the inventive genius of the gutter press!'

'Oh dear!' Maureen said, flippantly. Like Gavin she found the fuss about the pink-haired woman a bore. She got up. 'I'll go and see Maggie about some tea.'

Gavin was still talking about the ride. Laurence took his hand

to indicate that he was listening, but the boy's eager babble of green hills flowed over him. He was thinking that 'Kay Carter would have no difficulty in tracing them to the Villa Napoli once she started inquiring among Dublin journalists; plenty of them would remember Terence Edwards and know where his family lived, and it would be natural to assume they were staying there. And since this morning's brief encounter she would have her knife into him and might start on another line of inquiry—about the deaf-blind boy-poet's scar-faced friend. . . . That would make a nice little story for her column—right up the *Sunday Sensation's* street.

Kay had, in her own vernacular, other fish to fry at the weekend, and though shortly after Laurence had left the bar she had discovered the Edwards's Killiney address, she did nothing about it until Monday—which was ample time for the following Sunday's edition.

She earned two thousand a year on the *Sunday Sensation* and liked it to be known that she had come up the hard way, graduating to Fleet Street via a woman's weekly. She was the little-girl-from-the-provinces-who-had-made-good. Her father was foreman in a shoe factory in Northampton—a fact which had provided her childhood and girlhood with a good solid lower-middle-class background, with just not enough of the kind of comforts and luxuries she aspired to to stimulate her into bettering herself. She came of a large family and various of her brothers and sisters had similar ambitions and had migrated to London at various stages of their careers in pursuit of them. Kay followed them when she was sixteen and lived for a time with a married sister. She was a bright girl and knew what she wanted: she wanted money and she wanted to be a celebrity. She knew her limitations and had too much good Midlands commonsense to aspire to being a film star; or even a famous writer, though she had always been good at 'composition' at school and liked 'scribbling'. You could write books and still not be famous, or even rich; that much she realized early on, being bright. And though she was attractive—everyone said so—she did not deceive herself she was beautiful. She was *bright*; that was

her thing. Bright like the women who wrote the beauty and personal columns in the women's weeklies. Bright like the women whose photographs, glamorous with smart hair-do's and large beads, appeared at the head of Sunday paper articles about love and marriage, and in interviews with people in the news over divorces or murders and things like that. Women like that even had power over famous film stars and novelists for they could say what they liked about them—and did. You would meet all kinds of people, move about, and make a great deal of money. A job on a woman's weekly was as good a start as any, for a bright girl like Kay Johnson, who hadn't needed any editor to tell her that Kay Carter was a better name for the kind of journalist she aspired to be.

She was married at twenty-five and divorced before she was thirty. She married a press photographer whom she had thought attractive and amusing and who had proved himself bedworthy—for by twenty-five she had become a connoisseur in such matters. She had calculated that being married to him would be fun as he would be away a great deal, thus ensuring that the sexual thing, as she called it, would not grow stale on them. But it didn't work out, for Mike had just as much fun away from home as at home and saw no point in hurrying home when it was fun where he was; as a result of which he began to provide less fun at home. He ended up, after a few years, by not coming home at all—disliking domestic scenes—and Kay eventually divorced him, after first asking the court's discretion regarding herself, her counsel making the point that a young and attractive lady neglected by her husband is after all only human.

Getting rid of Mike was a relief. She was free now in all ways. By the time she was in her early thirties she had had a good deal of journalistic experience and the weekly column in the *Sunday Sensation* was a good way along the road she had set herself to travel since she had left Northampton at sixteen. It was not all the way. She had hoped to be earning five thousand a year before she was forty; but still, she had five years yet to go and she was establishing a following. Kay Carter's Column had become an accepted feature of Sunday journalism. Her fashionably groomed head, hard good

looks, large beads, appeared frequently on hoardings and on the front of London buses.

She had long ago shed her Midlands accent and all other provincialisms. She prided herself on being the hard-boiled newspaper woman who nevertheless maintained her sexual attractiveness. Out of working hours she had only one use for men and she preferred men who had only one use for women; it avoided emotional complications. She didn't want anyone in love with her; she couldn't be bothered with it. She wanted that men should admire her, as a journalist and as a woman, and that those she found sexually attractive should find her equally so—which they usually did. Their interest in her had to be exclusive whilst the affair lasted, and it was usually she who terminated the relationship. She remained on good terms with most of her men friends, but the only one she had ever felt anything like affection for was the one she now thought of as 'poor old Mike', with whom she occasionally had a drink. He had become a little seedy with the years, was drinking too much, and not doing too well. He touched her for a fiver now and then and she always gave it to him for, as she said, old time's sake. Even his occasional, 'Can't you bump it up to a tenner, old girl?' never put her off. She was sorry for him, and as she confided to various of his colleagues and successors, she had had a lot of fun with him in the old days. He was her only sentimentality. For her parents she had an easy-going affection. She sent them money presents at Christmas and on their birthdays and periodically had them come to London and stay in her flat and took them to theatres and to restaurants where she had accounts. They admired her immensely and she enjoyed demonstrating her sophistication. She enjoyed occasionally playing the role of the girl from the provinces who had made good but still retained an affection for her background and roots—her Gracie Fields act she called it to her intimates—but in her heart she knew it was phoney. And whatever else she was she wasn't that, she would insist. Take it or leave it she was genuine of her kind. No nonsense. No hoey. Positively none. Hard. Well, you had to be or you went under. Look at poor old Mike. . . .

She took a taxi out to Killiney on the Sunday and had the

driver wait. She didn't expect much from the trip but she had nothing else to do that afternoon and you never knew; a description of the deaf-blind boy-poet's Irish hide-out might anyhow make a paragraph for her column, if nothing more, keeping the pot boiling on this particular story till something more interesting turned up. There might be a gossipy Irish cook or housekeeper who could be brought along in some careless talk. You never knew. It was what made this sort of work so fascinating. People you interviewed thought when you stopped asking questions that the interview was over; then if you'd made a good impression they sometimes asked if you'd like a cup of tea, or a glass of sherry, and you of course said that that would be very nice. Whilst they were out of the room making the tea or fetching the drink, or glasses for it, you had a chance to look round the room, which was sometimes useful. Then over tea, or whatever it was, they relaxed and gossiped, talking easily and freely if they liked you—and it was your business to see that they did—and telling you all manner of things. It was then you really got your material. If they didn't like what they subsequently saw in print it was their own fault; it should be a lesson to them not to gossip to strangers—particularly those connected with newspapers.

She was wearing a tweed suit for her call at the Villa Napoli, no beads, and the minimum of lipstick—of a tone so pale as to be almost invisible. Most of her pinked hair was hidden underneath a felt hat, and she wore flat-heeled shoes. Suit, hat and shoes were all very 'good' and should make a favourable impression on the Anglo-Irish quality with whom she expected to deal—for obviously there was nothing to be got from that scar-faced companion. Sometime she would check on him. For one thing it would be interesting to know how he came by the scar.

She strolled down the avenue and came to the front door, with its pillared porch and flowering creepers on the walls. She decided to have a look round before ringing the bell and turned the corner of the house and stood a moment to take in the garden's Italianate vistas, with the sea glimmering brightly blue through the trees in the afternoon sunshine. There were wicker

garden chairs on the terrace, and a table on which the cultural Sunday papers lay scattered, clumsily folded and in disorder.

Whilst she was taking in this scene, mentally recording it, in the trained-observer fashion on which she prided herself, a red-haired girl wearing riding breeches came through the French windows and emerged upon the terrace. An attractive girl, Kay registered. She saw the girl's start of surprise and smiled reassuringly.

'Please forgive me intruding,' she said, pleasantly. 'I rang the front-door bell, but there was no answer and I couldn't resist peeping round the corner into this lovely garden.'

'The bell hasn't rung for years,' Maureen told her. 'We know all the people who call here and they just stroll round. Did you want to see my grandparents?'

'I hoped to see Gavin Edwards,' Kay said, pleasantly, adding, 'I'm from the *Sunday Sensation*. Kay Carter. I'll give you my card.'

'Kay Carter? Then it was you who wrote that awful piece the other Sunday! What on earth do you want to see my cousin about now?'

'I just happened to be in Dublin—over for the Festival. I met Mr. Oakes in a bar on Friday, so I knew I'd find your cousin here.'

'He's not here. They went back yesterday. Didn't Mr. Oakes tell you they were going back Saturday?'

Kay laughed, amiably.

'Mr. Oakes never tells a poor journalist anything!'

'Can you blame him? That was an awful piece you wrote.'

'I wonder why you say that? For one thing I said your cousin was handsome.'

'You referred to Mr. Oakes as his scar-faced friend and tried to make out there was some mystery about him.'

Kay said, still smiling, 'Well, isn't there?'

Maureen flushed with anger.

'Of course not. And look, you can't see my grandparents for they're both out and I'm just going riding.'

'Can I give you a lift? I've a taxi waiting in the road.'

'No, thanks. It's no distance. I'll walk with you to the end of the drive.'

'I'd love to see the house and garden.'

'I'm sorry. I told you—my grandparents aren't here. They wouldn't like me showing a stranger round—especially a journalist.'

Maureen walked a few steps but felt obliged to stop when Kay did not follow.

'It's so beautiful here,' Kay said. 'It's tragic that your cousin can no longer see it. Heartbreaking.'

'He knows what it's like. He has known it since he was a child. Please come. I have to go.'

'Aren't you going to close the French windows?'

'It's not necessary. The servants are around.'

'Servants? You're terribly grand, aren't you?'

'I wouldn't have thought so.'

'In England people think themselves lucky if they have a daily woman for a couple of hours.'

'I'm sure there are still families in England who have servants.'

'Only very grand people.'

Maureen made no comment. She disliked this woman intensely. She felt she understood now why Laurence had returned from his encounter with her in so agitated a state. There was something evil about her; the evil of heartlessness. She would stop at nothing this side of murder to get a story for her horrible paper, she felt.

Kay asked, pleasantly, 'I suppose you're a keen horsewoman?'

'I like riding, yes.'

'Does Gavin like riding?'

'Yes. It's one of the things he's still able to do. We——' she stopped suddenly, aghast. Why was she telling this dreadful Kay Carter person things? She would only print them in some distorted fashion. That was what she was there for—to get something to print.

'You were going to say——' Kay prompted.

'Nothing. There's your taxi——'

Kay hesitated at the open gates of the drive.

'You needn't worry, you know,' she said. 'I don't intend to write anything about your cousin for next Sunday. It's too soon for any

more about him. When he publishes his next book, perhaps. What does Mr. Oakes do for a living? Or,' she added quickly, 'is Gavin his living?'

'I'm not telling you anything,' Maureen said, her heart beating very fast. 'Good afternoon!'

She turned back into the drive.

'I thought you were going riding?'

'I've changed my mind.'

Maureen tugged at the gate, pushed back into the shrubs, dragging it forward to close it. Kay lingered for a moment more then decided there was nothing more to be got out of this tiresome girl.

'Well, good afternoon,' she said, with what she hoped was an ironic smile.

Maureen, still dragging the gate forward, neither looked up nor answered, and Kay got into the taxi and drove back to Dublin.

On the way she did a good deal of thinking, not about Gavin Edwards but about his friend.

BACK at Redlands the woman who had worked for them for a time and who had agreed to come in during their absence to feed Minna, she reported to Laurence that the cat had been missing for the last few days. She had looked everywhere, all over the garden and orchard and under the hedges, and even gone up and down the lane in both directions looking under the hedges and calling, and had asked the postman and various other people if they had seen the creature, but to no avail. She had been very worried, knowing how upset Mr. Gavin would be. Being as she was a doctored lady-cat she would be unlikely to stray away, and she could only think she had been stolen. There were people about—you read it in the papers—who stole cats with good coats and sold them to fur dealers. So you never knew. If Minna didn't turn up in a few days perhaps a new little kitten should be got for Mr. Gavin? She knew someone whose cat had just had kittens. . . .

Laurence said he would let her know. Gavin had asked for the cat immediately they had got back and had been disappointed and worried because she couldn't be found. Laurence didn't tell him she had been missing for three days. He told him not to worry; he would go out and make inquiries and hunt for Minna himself. The possibility of the cat having been caught in a rabbit trap or snare occurred to him very strongly and he hoped it wouldn't occur to Gavin. He knew that rabbits had been reappearing and that some farmers had been setting steel traps and wire snares. The first night they were back there was heavy rain, and he lay in bed thinking of the cat lying out somewhere under a hedge with a crushed foot or a broken leg. He thought it unlikely she would still be in the trap after three days, for the traps were not left for so long. It was

more likely that she had been released and had dragged herself off somewhere—perhaps to die.

It was dark when they got back so he had been unable to search; he was resolved to get up early in the morning, before Gavin was awake, and go out and scour the field hedgerows.

Gavin also lay awake for a long time, fretting. He also thought of Minnaloushe lying out somewhere helpless, unable to drag herself home. He knew that it was raining hard because he had gone several times to the door and called, and after he had gone to bed he continually asked Laurence if it was still raining; finally Laurence gave him a sleeping pill, telling him he must get some rest, and wanting some himself.

The boy was sleeping deeply when he got up about seven and dressed and went downstairs. The light was cold and grey over the sea, and heavy cloud massed over Dartmoor; it had stopped raining, but everything dripped. He took an old raincoat from a hook on the back of the kitchen door, unbolted the door and was about to step out into the garden then drew back in time to avoid stepping on the body of Minnaloushe lying below the step.

She lay stretched out, her long wet fur clinging to her body giving her a drowned look, and so still that at first he believed her to be dead. Her eyes were open and as he bent down to her her mouth opened and closed again, though no sound came from it. He saw that her right hind-foot was a mess of congealed blood.

He gently lifted her up and brought her into the kitchen and laid her on the rug in front of the fireplace. He put milk into a saucepan to warm and whilst waiting for it tried to dry her long fur a little. Because she was too weak to lap the milk he dribbled some into her mouth with a spoon. When some of it had gone down she revived, raised her head and began to lap. He knelt beside her, his face filled with tenderness.

When she had taken a saucerful of the milk and began making a feeble effort to clean herself he fetched gauze and antiseptic and cotton wool and began swabbing the injured foot, very gently and murmuring soothingly to her the while. When the congealed blood was disposed of he examined the foot closely and saw that it was encircled by a deep cut the width of the wire used in snares.

After the cleansing operation he made the cat comfortable in her basket, scrubbed his hands with a surgeon's thoroughness, then made tea and took a cup up to Gavin. The boy was dozing but wakened quickly at the familiar touch and sat up and demanded instantly, 'Has Minnaloushe come back?'

Laurence set the cup of tea down on the side table to tell him, 'Yes. She has been in a snare and has an injured foot. I've done what I can for her. Don't worry. Cats are tough. Take your tea now.'

He tried to put the cup of tea into his hand but Gavin refused it, impatiently. He was as distressed as Laurence had feared he would be, and full of rage against people who set snares and traps. He scrambled out of bed and groped his way downstairs to the corner of the kitchen where the cat-basket always stood, Laurence following him. He knelt down, feeling carefully, and his hand came into contact with the thin body, with the fur clinging wetly to it.

'All your lovely fur!' he lamented.

He moved his hand along and found the small head and caressed it, softly, his eyes filling with tears.

'My poor darling little Minna! My little love! What have they done to you! But you'll be all right now. We'll get you better!'

Laurence, moved by the boy's grief, laid a hand on his shoulder. Gavin turned his face up to him.

'We will, won't we, Laurie?' he pleaded.

Laurence looked down into the brilliant blue eyes, which at times he still found it difficult to believe were blind, and pressed the hand that clung to his, in mute assent.

Gavin stood up and demanded was she in pain, would the foot heal, shouldn't they phone for the vet?

Laurence didn't think it necessary to telephone the vet; it looked like a clean cut, he said, and should heal. Every evening when he got in from work he immediately attended to the cat, and Minnaloushe, no longer weak and exhausted, resisted treatment and bit and scratched and struggled; Gavin would hold her whilst Laurence swabbed and bandaged. For a few days the cat ate a little and hopped about on three legs; then the leg began to swell and liquid oozed from the toes. She no longer ate, and left her

basket only to drag herself to a box of ashes Laurence had put down for her.

At the end of a week Laurence got home to find Gavin crouching distraught over the cat's basket. He touched him on the shoulder and Gavin shouted, distractedly, 'I'm sure she's worse! There's a dreadful smell coming from her foot. Why don't we get a vet? I said all along we should!'

Laurence put the cat into the boy's arms and proceeded to remove bandage and dressing. He examined the foot closely and saw that pus was coming from it, and the smell was of putrefaction. He suspected gangrene. A vet, he thought, would probably say she should be destroyed.

He bathed and dressed the foot again and told Gavin, 'I'll ring the vet in the morning if there's no improvement.'

'Ring him tonight,' Gavin insisted, wildly. 'Why not tonight? She might be dead by morning!'

Laurence tried two numbers; the first vet was away from home; the second he disturbed at a game of bridge. Had it been a sick horse or a calving cow in trouble, or even a dog, but to be brought to the telephone for a *cat*. . . .

He listened impatiently whilst Laurence described the symptoms, then said curtly that if mortification had set in the animal would have to be put down. It should be brought to him in the morning; the surgery opened at nine.

As curtly Laurence said, 'Thank you for nothing,' and rang off.

He told Gavin, 'The vet said there's nothing to worry about, but I should take her into him in the morning for a shot of something that will help her along.'

In the morning he put Minnaloushe into a basket which he strapped to the carrier of his bicycle and on his way to work took her to a man who ran a dispensary for sick animals. He remembered noticing this place as he cycled to and fro. This vet listened sympathetically and agreed that Minnaloushe was a gallant little cat and that having escaped the snare had a right to live. He never destroyed an animal, he said, unless he was convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that it had no chance, and almost always there was that chance. He was a man who believed—and that passionately

—that all animals had the right to live, the basic right, and he was saddened by the great army of ‘animal lovers’ who sentimentalized over some animals, notably cats and dogs, but had no qualms about having others—and those the gentlest in the animal world—slaughtered, quite unnecessarily, for food.

He did not say this to the worried-looking young man who brought the deaf-blind boy’s sick cat to him. He was old and grey now, and grey inside himself with hopelessness; as a young man, fiery with anger at man’s inhumanity to man everywhere, and his inhumanity to the animal world, to the creatures who had no choice and whose brief lives were nothing but journeys to abattoirs and vivisection laboratories—in those days, believing that people had only to have evil pointed out to them to recognize it, he had talked of these things to the people whose sick animals, chiefly pets, he healed and cured; but they had looked at him askance, and he had come to dread that look—of incomprehension, or resentment, the look that labelled him crank, and in time he had lost heart. People had to come to these things by themselves, and for the most part they wouldn’t, lulling their consciences with talk of humane killing, which would be comic if it were not so tragic. . . .

He would do his best for the little Minnaloushe-cat, he said; it might still be possible to arrest the gangrene before it spread but her little toes would drop off that foot, leaving her with a stump; she would be a dot-and-carry cat, he said, with his sad smile, but still beautiful, and, he hoped, with eight lives left.

Laurence left Minnaloushe with this sad grey man and continued on his way to the hospital. He was not himself particularly interested in animals; he certainly did not consider himself an animal lover; he happened to like cats—he found them curiously moving and had empathy for them—and this cat in particular because she was important to Gavin, who was deprived of so much. Gavin’s happiness was involved in her recovery, and my whole life, he thought, is bound up inextricably with Gavin’s well-being.

It had become, he recognized, his whole *raison d’être*. Once there were other justifications for his existence; now there was only this one. The work he did at the hospital was useful, but it

was menial—anyone could do it. Other people could look after Gavin, too, anyone trained in the care of the deaf-blind; but the boy needed more than trained care; he needed an emotional caring, a human relationship in which he could trust. He needed friendship and love—a selfless love.

You really love Gavin, Maureen had said, and he had winced away from it. What he felt for Gavin was private—secret and inviolable. In all the emotional aridity of his life there was just this one thing, and to it his life was dedicated. Something to live for; something, equally, to die for if need be. He had never consciously sought, but ultimately he had found. Clare was right in her perceptiveness. Innerly he had never disputed this, though he had flinched, disconcerted, from the recognition of it. Because it was not to be talked about. Or even, except very rarely, to be acknowledged.

AFTER a few days the vet gave Laurence a date as to when he could fetch Minnaloushe, but Laurence did not tell Gavin because he wanted to indulge himself in the pleasure of arriving home from work one evening and putting the cat into the boy's arms.

He fetched the cat on the appointed day and when he reached the house propped his bicycle against the wall, opened the basket on the carrier and lifted out its bewildered inmate. He stroked her and soothed her and her eyes went big and dark as he carried her into the house.

He was disappointed not to find Gavin in the kitchen as usual. He put the cat down and she weaved round his legs purring like a humming top. She stalked round the room, touching the floor only lightly with her mutilated foot, sniffing, investigating, re-familiarizing herself with the place, and always coming back to the man to weave herself purring round his legs. He stood for a few minutes watching her, smiling, then picked her up and carried her into the living-room. He found Gavin sitting in an armchair, his head supported on a hand, so still that at first Laurence thought he was asleep.

Laurence went over to him and saw that he sat with his eyes open. He touched him on the shoulder and the boy responded immediately.

'Oh, hullo, Laurie.'

Laurence pressed his hand and then put the cat into his arms. Gavin's face lit up.

'Minnaloushe!' He buried his face in her fur.

'Is she all right?' he asked, eagerly.

Laurence told him, 'Yes. The foot has healed beautifully. Have a chat with her and I'll fix a meal.'

'I'm sorry not to have anything ready,' Gavin said. 'I went off into a sort of day-dream.'

Laurence touched his cheek in the affection sign to indicate that the deviation from their usual arrangement did not matter and went back to the kitchen.

Gavin sat with the cat on his knees, stroking her mechanically, but he did not speak to her, and when, bored, she jumped down and went in search of Laurence and food he barely noticed.

For the first time he had a secret from Laurence, and he was utterly obsessed by it. He had spent two hours alone with Kay Carter. Not being interviewed, no; she had assured him of that, tapping it out smartly on the Arcaid. She had come to see him because, she said, she had been so sorry to miss him in Ireland; she had been wanting to talk to him ever since she had seen him on television with Mr. Berring. She loved his poems, and she refused to be kept at bay by that old dragon, Laurence . . .

They had talked and laughed together—he had sensed her laughter, and she had allowed him to touch her so that he knew what she looked like, and he thought her beautiful. She had been gone over an hour when Laurence arrived, and in that time he had not stirred from the armchair, lost in an endless reverie of her.

Kay had only with some difficulty discovered the Devon address. It would be useless, she knew, to try the Haytons; or Maurice Berring; ringing the television studios produced only an assurance that letters would be forwarded. Mr. Val Merrion's office said the same. She persisted and asked to speak to Mr. Merrion himself.

'This is urgent,' she told him. 'I want to get a nice piece about your young poet into my column next Sunday.'

'You must know,' Mr. Merrion said politely but firmly, 'that publishers never disclose their authors' addresses, but we always forward letters that come addressed care of us. I am very sorry, but this is a firm rule throughout the publishing world.'

Kay said, with journalistic persistence, 'There are exceptions to every rule. A piece about Gavin in my column next Sunday will link up nicely with a special autumn books page we are running.'

'Has the *Sunday Sensation* gone literary?' Mr. Merriion inquired, undisguisedly astonished.

'Not in the sense of the literary Sundays, of course not. But throughout September we intend to feature a few popular authors.'

'Gavin Edwards could hardly be called that!'

'With the right publicity he could be made one!'

'Mr. Edwards has so far published only one slim volume of somewhat *recherché* verse,' Mr. Merriion pointed out, stiffly. He added, 'Frankly, Miss Carter, publicity in the *Sunday Sensation* is not helpful for the kind of career we envisage for this young writer.'

Kay knew when she was beaten.

'O.K.,' she said carelessly. 'It's your loss. 'Bye.'

She then lit a cigarette and thought hard. There were institutions that looked after the blind and the deaf and the doubly afflicted. The one that came most readily to mind was the Royal National Institute for the Blind. There was also the National Institute for the Deaf, and the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb. She had no idea which, if any of them catered for the deaf-blind, but with dogged journalistic persistence she began telephoning.

This time she kept Kay Carter and the *Sunday Sensation* out of it. She was a friend of the late Terence Edwards, and was extremely and urgently anxious to get in touch with his son; she had telephoned Sir James Hayton's house but the family, it seemed, were away. She was referred from one organization to another, and from one person to another; finally she spoke to a young woman who worked with Mrs. Williams who had been, Kay learned, his Home Teacher. Mrs. Williams was out and not expected back until tomorrow, but the young woman, eager to help, thought she could find Mr. Edwards' address if Miss Carter would hold on. Miss Carter held on and was duly rewarded with the address. It was by then too late to get down to Devon in time to see Gavin alone, before the frightful Laurence Oakes person got back from work, but there was a good morning train which would get her there by lunchtime and tomorrow would still be in good time for next Sunday.

She found the gates locked when she arrived at the house, but she had overcome greater difficulties than that. She walked all round the house looking for a possible gap in the hedge to squeeze through, but it was a thick wild hedge and not negotiable. She then went back down the lane, climbed a gate into a field and made her way up over the field to the orchard, conveniently bounded only by railings. She climbed the railings, crossed the orchard, and entered the garden. She walked round the house peering in at the ground-floor windows, and then saw Gavin sitting at a table typing.

She went in through the kitchen and entered the living-room. She found it an uncanny sensation to be in the presence of someone who could neither see nor hear and was momentarily disconcerted. She looked round the room and spotted the Arcaid on a table and felt reassured. There was the means of communication. Now to make her presence known to the boy without startling him. But that was impossible. She went over to him and lightly touched his arm and he started, violently.

'Who's that?' he demanded, fearfully.

She took his hand and wrote laboriously in the palm in block capitals 'KAY CAR—'

At that he smiled.

'Oh, Miss Kay Carter—the *Sunday Sensation*. Can you use the Arcaid?'

She wrote 'Yes' in his hand and he got up and groped his way to the table. She sat down at the machine and he seated himself beside her.

'Please go slowly,' he said, 'or I won't keep up.'

She began to type.

'Forgive me barging in like this, but ever since I saw you on TV I felt I wanted to talk to you—not as Kay Carter of the *Sunday Sensation* but just as myself. I loved your owl poem. I hope you liked the piece I wrote about you a while back—'

'I didn't mind it, but Laurence was mad about it. So was everybody else!'

She continued: 'It was the best I could do in view of all the unco-operativeness I was up against. Sometime I'd like to write a

really good piece that would help you in your career—not necessarily for the *Sunday Sensation*. But now I'd just like to get to know you a little for my own sake—just an ordinary friendly chat if you feel you would be interested and can spare the time.'

Gavin declared enthusiastically that he had all the time in the world.

'After all, I'm alone all day, and I never meet anyone except Laurence. Or almost no one. Maurice Berring came to see me once, and my publisher, Mr. Merrion. A man I knew in the san, the one I dedicated my book to, wrote that he'd come, but he never did. People find it worrying, I suppose, that they have to talk to me on my hand, or through a machine. You can't blame them—it's laborious and tiring and they soon give up. It's all so slow, and they haven't the patience. Laurence, and my cousin Maureen, in Ireland, are the only ones who have patience. I suppose because they're the only ones who really care about me.'

Kay wrote all this in a notebook in shorthand, then tapped out on the machine.

'What about your mother?'

'She's been here a few times, but she can't manage the hand-language, and though she can use the machine she can't find anything to say on it. We never had much to say to each other even before all this happened. Then she married old Sir James Hayton and we had even less. She hasn't been here for nearly a year now. She rings Laurence up sometimes to find out how I'm going along. She rang from London to Ireland after your article appeared. Just to say how hopping mad she and the old boy were.'

'How did that help? I mean what was the point? If she had rung me I could have understood it.'

'She wanted to know if we had seen the article, and she wanted to find out if Laurence really said what you made him say.'

'Of course he did. But he said very little. He kept saying pork-and-greens. He's a very odd person. What does he do for a living? How did he get that scar?'

'He works at a hospital. I don't know how he got the scar. I've never asked him. In some accident, I suppose. But he doesn't like to talk about himself, and he's not the sort of person you can ask

personal questions of. I don't try to. I always think he'll tell me as time goes on all he wants me to know.'

'How did you meet him?'

'Through Mrs. Williams—my home teacher. I was living in London, then, with my mother and her husband, and Laurence was working at a London hospital. My stepfather fixed us up with this place——'

It all went down into the notebook. It was very laborious, and rather exhausting, but immensely worth while. He was the ideal interviewee; he talked so readily, so unconstrainedly; as though he were not merely willing but actually eager to tell anything and everything. God's gift to a journalist with a weekly gossip column to fill.

For Gavin, despite the laboriousness, it was all very exciting. He was aware of her perfume, something subtle and elusive.

'I wish you could talk on my hand,' he told her. 'It's so much more personal.'

'Explain it to me.'

He explained it to her and she took his hand to try. The experiment crumpled up in laughter and they were left holding hands. After that she several times took his hand whilst he was talking and the conversation took a more personal turn.

He asked her what she was like.

'I ask everyone that,' he said, and added, 'Laurence says you have pink hair!'

She pressed his hand, then typed, 'Not more pink than women who have blue rinses can be said to have blue hair.'

'May I touch it?'

She bent forward so that her hair brushed his cheek and he placed his hands on the top of her head, twining his fingers in the loose softness of her hair, then moving them down over her ears and the curve of her face. Then he drew his fingers down the line of her nose and along her lips, very lightly.

He smiled, happily.

'You must be pretty,' he said.

She tapped out on the machine, 'People tell me so—men especially. You,' she added, 'are very attractive.'

'What good is it to me now if I am? No one is going to fall in love with me now.'

'Nonsense,' she made the machine tell him. 'Plenty of deaf-blind people marry, after they've become like that. Your Irish cousin is probably madly in love with you!'

He laughed.

'I wish she were, but she's not. We're too much like brother and sister. Anyhow she's older than I am.'

She assured him, 'Difference in age never yet made any difference to two people attracted to each other.'

'Well, anyhow, I don't attract her in that way. I've never attracted anyone in that way, and now I probably never will. All I can do is sublimate all the frustration in poetry!'

'It's early days yet. You've barely begun to live. Everything has still to happen to you. But I think it's all wrong that you live shut away here with Laurence. You should be living in London and meeting people.'

'I wanted to be away from London and to be by the sea. I hated it in London. It was only Laurie who made it bearable. Here we go for walks and he can swim and sometimes we go sailing and I have a garden and greenhouse to potter in. I don't really want people. I want just one person close to me, and I've got that person in Laurie.'

'In time Laurence won't be enough.'

He said, troubled, 'I can't think so far ahead. I'm lucky to have Laurence, and to be able to go to Ireland, and go sailing, and riding with Maureen. I've got a lot to be thankful for—I mustn't be discontented—'

She was aware that she had disturbed him and was sorry. She would never wish to hurt by the spoken word, unavoidable as it was in the written word.

She typed, 'Don't worry. Someone will love you in a special way eventually—not just as a friend.'

She then got up and put an arm round him and stroked his hair back from his forehead, caressingly. He turned his face into her breast and clung to her. She left him deeply disturbed, sunk in the reverie in which Laurence found him.

KAY CARTER'S COLUMN the following Sunday was rich and full with what the *Sunday Sensation* now referred to as the 'Gavin Edwards Story'. Now readers who would never read a line of anything Gavin ever wrote could be treated to all the details of his background—his grandparents' house on 'beautiful Killiney Bay, near Dublin', the 'attractive girl cousin, a typical Irish colleen', with whom the 'deaf-blind boy-poet still rides in the Dublin mountains', an equally lush and full and off-beat description of the hill-top house in Devon, with locked gates and surrounded by high hedges—'every morning before going off to work Larry, as he calls his strange, silent companion, locks him in—"I don't really want people,"' Gavin declared. Yet later he was to confess, wistfully, that he had the same yearnings for romantic love as any other young man of his age! This paragraph was sub-titled, 'Yearning for Love'. This was followed by a paragraph entitled, 'Mother's Second Marriage'.

'Gavin's young and pretty mother remained a widow for a year then married her boss, Sir James Hayton. She telephones the Devon house from London, but has not visited there for a year. "We never had much in common," Gavinsays, ruefully, "and rather less since she married again."'

When Vivien read that she felt quite ill. Why should that horrible woman do that to her? Why couldn't she leave Gavin alone? And what was Laurence doing allowing her to the house and conniving, as he must have done, at an interview with Gavin?

James was furious.

'It's got to stop,' he said, violently. 'I didn't fix them up with that place for them to sit there and serenely give interviews to the

gutter press! They'd better pack it up. Gavin should come back here to live and the Oakes person can go where he dam' well pleases!

'Gavin would be so unhappy living here,' Vivien protested. 'It didn't work before. It would work even less well now, with Helga gone, the one person he got along with. Perhaps they could go to some more secluded place—one that could be kept a secret and where people like this dreadful woman couldn't get at them.'

James chuckled.

'Banish the pair of 'em to some remote island, you mean?'

'Not exactly that. But some far-away place not easy to get to. Somewhere fifty miles from the nearest railway station and only two buses a day.'

'Are there such places in this country?'

'Not in this country. But there are in Ireland. In the far West. Terry and I spent a holiday there once. I'd never have believed there could be such cut-off places in the British Isles.'

'The Irish won't thank you for including them in that!'

'Well, you know what I mean. I think Laurence should give up his hospital job and go over there and have a look round. They could always go to Dublin and Killiney two or three times a year when they wanted a break. No one should have the address—not even Gavin's publisher or Mrs. Williams. Our address should serve for everything—we can always forward letters.'

'All that's wrong with the idea is that they probably wouldn't agree to it, and we can't force them to.'

'Laurence is a free agent, but Gavin isn't. He's a minor. If they don't agree to this plan then Gavin has the choice of coming here to live or being accommodated in some home that caters for the deaf-blind.'

He stared at her, incredulously.

'You wouldn't contemplate that? I thought you were dead against any such idea.'

'I was, and I still don't like it, but if he wants to go on living with Laurence he must live where we say, or else face the other alternatives. We can't be pestered year in and year out by this sort of thing——'

She flicked at the *Sunday Sensation*.

'You said yourself,' she added, violent in turn, 'that it had got to stop!'

'I was thinking only of bringing the boy back here to live, where we can control him. Of course if Oakes would agree to clear out to some remote place it would solve the problem. I'll write to him tomorrow from the office. The lease is due for renewal and I'll simply tell him that we have decided that it would be undesirable to continue with the present arrangement and present him with the alternatives as an ultimatum. It might be an idea if you rang him tonight and sounded him out—ask him if he's seen the *Sunday Sensation* and if he doesn't agree that steps have to be taken to prevent a recurrence of this nuisance.'

Laurence had not in fact seen the *Sunday Sensation* and was astonished when Vivien telephoned that evening and told him about it. She was equally astonished that he knew nothing about it.

She protested, 'You must have known that when that woman came to the house she would write up and distort everything said to her! Why else should she come?'

'I didn't know she'd been here. Gavin didn't tell me. You forget I'm not here all day.'

'You said you locked the gates whilst you were away.'

'I do. But I suppose a determined person could get in. Well, evidently this one did. I'm quite as upset about it all as you are, I can assure you!'

'You're let off lightly this time!'

'It doesn't matter what's said about me. What I find upsetting is Gavin having a secret from me. I can't understand it at all.'

She said, bitterly, 'He was always secretive!'

'Not with me.'

'Well, anyhow, Sir James is going to write to you tomorrow. He's not renewing the lease of Redlands. He says that if you want to go on living together you must find a remote place in the far West of Ireland where the press can't reach you and Gavin can't embarrass everyone by giving interviews.'

· 'The far West of Ireland? How can I make a living there? Even

the Irish can't! Or is it suggested I get a job dish-washing in a tourist hotel during the season and live on my savings, if any, the rest of the year?'

'He didn't say. You could probably make some arrangement with him if you were agreeable to go.'

'I'm not. It's preposterous!'

He was extremely angry.

She said, icily, 'If you won't co-operate then Gavin must come home to live.'

'He'd be miserable, you know that.'

'The alternative would be for him to go into a home.'

He found it difficult to believe he had heard aright.

'A home? What sort of a home?'

'There are homes for deaf-blind people, aren't there?'

'For unfortunate people who have no one to care for them, or whose families for some reason can't cope.'

'If he won't live at home, and if you aren't prepared to find some remote place where you can live together, what alternative is there? Anyhow think it over. But Sir James is definitely not renewing the lease of Redlands. He's had enough. So have I! I must go now. My love to Gavin. 'Bye.'

That goodbye on a rising inflection always irritated him by its casualness.

When he had hung up he went and sat in the kitchen for a few minutes trying to sort out his ideas before going in to Gavin. That Gavin should deceive him was a breach of faith with which he could not at all come to terms; and why he should talk to that woman at all once she had got into the place—and not merely talk but talk freely, as he quite clearly had. The problem represented by Sir James's ultimatum was relatively unimportant; they would find a place to go—a place where they could live secluded lives without being completely cut off, and where he could earn a living. It occurred to him that he needn't say anything at all to Gavin about Kay Carter's visit and her piece which had caused all the trouble. But then the deception, the betrayal of confidence, would always stand between them. It would be a good thing to up and go from Devon; they would have no peace there now. Perhaps

they could hide away in the Wicklow Hills; then they could go in sometimes to Killiney for sailing, and for Gavin to go riding with Maureen. But whether it would be feasible then for him to work in Dublin, and whether he could get a job there if it was, was another matter. All this would solve itself; the material problems invariably did. Life had a way of solving them for you. It was the emotional problems that were the devil.

He got up and went into the living-room. Gavin was sitting where he had left him, by the open window, Minnaloushe purring in his lap.

He touched his shoulder and sat down beside him.

'You were a long time on the telephone,' Gavin complained. He had been irritable and petulant the last few days and Laurence had wondered why; now he thought he knew.

He took his hand and told him, 'It was your mother. The Boss and she are both very annoyed by a piece Kay has in her rag again today. Why didn't you tell me she was here?'

'I knew you'd be mad about it. I didn't know she was going to write anything. We just talked. I enjoyed her visit. I get tired of sitting here in darkness and silence day after day.'

'I'm sorry. Perhaps I should give up my job and be with you all the time, but what would we use for money?'

'Make the old man stump up, of course.'

'He's not renewing the lease here. He wants us to clear out to some remote place in the West of Ireland where the press can't get at us.'

'The old bastard! Why should we bury ourselves alive just to please him?'

'The alternative is for you to live in his house.'

'I'd die, rather! Not even Helga there!'

'I could see you every day after work. It mightn't be so bad.'

'You'd visit me in prison—that's what it would amount to!'

He was shouting in his angry excitement.

Laurence pressed his hand, then said on it, 'Calm down. We'll find a solution. But we can't stay here. Perhaps Maureen would find something suitable for us. We might write to her. If we lived in Ireland we could go to Killiney sometimes and take the boat out

and you could ride again. Or she could come and stay with us sometimes.'

Gavin said, stubbornly, 'I don't see why we have to go and bury ourselves just because that horrible old man says so.'

'He wouldn't say so if that horrible woman would leave us alone!'

Gavin said, violently, 'She's not horrible. I like her! We'd a great talk on the Arcaid. I've a right to some sort of social intercourse, haven't I, like any other human being? Isn't it bad enough being sealed off like this without keeping everyone away from me? Most people can't be bothered to communicate. They find it all too difficult—even my mother. They haven't the patience. Kay has! She'd have stayed longer still but for not wanting you to find her there, knowing you hate her. She kissed me when she was going. Not the way Maureen kisses me, either. I can't get her out of my mind. It's as though she put a spell on me. I want her to come again—soon—soon!'

'So that she can write another vulgar piece about you?'

'I don't care what she writes! What does it matter?'

Suddenly he was weeping hysterically.

'Oh, you don't understand!' he cried. 'You can't imagine what it means to be like this!'

Laurence got up and put his arms round him, the old resistance to pity rising in him.

He said aloud, harshly, 'I do know! Dam' you, I do know!'

He gripped the boy's hand and opened the clenched fingers to tell him, 'I understand better than you think. Why don't we ask Clare to come for a day or two? You like her and she might have some useful suggestions.'

The storm subsided as suddenly as it had arisen.

'I'm sorry,' Gavin said. 'I get so wrought up and Kay has unsettled me. I can't sleep properly any more. Yes, let's ask Clare to come. She's peaceful.'

Laurence wrote to Clare and she replied that she would be visiting the rehabilitation centre for the blind in Torquay in a few days' time and could come to Redlands on the Friday evening, if

that suited. She would have to go back on the Sunday. Her attention had been drawn to the piece in the *Sunday Sensation* and she entirely agreed that the sooner they put themselves beyond reach of Kay Carter and her ghastly column the better. Retreat to some remote Irish place didn't seem to her a bad idea. The problem would be how to make a living there. 'Perhaps,' she wrote, 'you would feel able to accept payment from Sir James for looking after his stepson if you give up your job to do so. But we'll talk about it. I look forward very much to seeing you both again.'

They both as eagerly looked forward to seeing her, Laurence because he needed the reassurance of her confidence in him, Gavin because she represented a break in the monotony of his days.

The feel of Clare's cool, slim fingers, light yet suggestive of strength, moving over his hand again with unfaltering rapidity afforded Gavin immense pleasure. Her touch conveyed so much, like the tone of a voice. There was something splendid about her, he thought, exultantly, his lovely friend, the first to break through the enclosing walls of darkness and silence. He found himself intensely sensitive to her grey, cool presence, as aware of her as he was of sun and wind, even when she was not communicating with him. She seldom left him; when she was not talking on his hand she sat beside him, holding it, in gentle reassurance.

Laurence also felt the soothing effect of her presence. It was a relief to be with a woman whose sex did not impinge upon him, as Maurcen's did, although she did not attract him, and as Kay's did although he hated her. Clare was for him sexless, which made it possible to be honest with her and to trust her.

She persuaded Gavin without much difficulty that there was something to be said for moving to Ireland and that it didn't by any means entail being cut off from everyone. He felt unable to open his heart to her about Kay, but she learned about that from Laurence. She entirely agreed that for all the reasons they should remove themselves from Miss Carter's attentions.

'But the time will come,' she warned him, 'when your love and devotion won't be enough for him. You can't expect it to be. It

could be that that time is already here. You have to face the fact that in the end you must lose him.'

'I don't reckon to possess him! Or any human being. I see life in terms of service. I think you know. The hospital work never satisfied. Not even in conjunction with the work I did for the deaf-blind in London. Gavin represents fulfilment.'

She asked, gently, 'Do you know why?'

'I think so. For one thing he affords an emotional outlet. No one else does—or ever did. In all my life. No one.'

She inclined her head but offered no comment.

It was past midnight and Gavin had gone to bed with a sleeping pill two hours ago. They sat in the living-room with the door open in case the pill didn't work, or its effect last, and he should waken and call out—he had a horror of waking to find himself alone. The room was dimly lit from a small dark-shaded table-lamp; Laurence liked it like that because then the lights of Teignmouth strung out down below along the coast, across the valley of the estuary, showed up with a kind of carnival magic in the darkness. He never closed the curtains at night and never wearied of that spectacle of that necklace of lights strung out at the edge of the sea. The night was warm and still and soundless. Minnaloushe sat on the sill of the open window and looked out at the night without desire to investigate it further. It was as though one of her nine lives had been expended in the trap, and she was to that extent diminished.

After a pause, a brooding silence, he said, 'You don't know anything about me, do you?'

'Factually, no. Intuitively—a little.'

She smiled at him, and added, 'And you have observable virtues—an infinite patience with the deaf-blind—selflessness—'

He cut in quickly.

'That's not true. Everything I do is for myself. My whole obsession with life as action—as service. It looks good—the way you see it. Unselfish. Idealistic. Self-sacrificing. Whatever the words are. But it's all in aid of myself. There are other words. Rehabilitation. Quite a word, that! A favourite with welfare officers, psychologists, social workers. Expiation. A favourite of the padres. They're not really the right words, either. Words are tricky.

Misleading. I'm not interested in rehabilitation. And expiation was all arranged for me. Well and truly.'

He reached for a cigarette, filling in the pause, then concluded, 'This is all very egocentric. I'm sorry. Normally I don't talk. There's no one to talk to. Never has been. I've a desperate need to prove something to myself, that's all.'

She hesitated, then asked in a low voice, almost a whisper, 'What is it you're trying to prove to yourself?'

He laughed, harshly.

'No. You can't trick me into that one!'

She said in the same low voice, 'I wasn't trying to trick you. I was inviting your confidence. Making it easy for you. It doesn't matter. Whatever it is I hope you succeed in proving it to yourself—to your own satisfaction.'

He asked, abruptly, 'Supposing I agree to clear out with Gavin to some remote place in the West of Ireland, how do you suggest we live?'

'Gavin would have his allowance from his stepfather, and you would be justified in demanding a salary.'

'Thereby destroying my noble ideal of service,' he said sardonically.

'The service is in the devotion you bring to your care for Gavin, isn't it? Being recompensed for giving up your job and living in a required place can't affect that, surely?'

He said, drily, 'It's a nice Jesuitical get-out, anyway.' He got up. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Some cold milk would be pleasant, perhaps.'

'You can take that to bed with you to settle your stomach. What I'm proposing now is a drop of Irish.' He added quickly, 'I'd be glad if you'd join me. It's monotonous drinking alone, night after night.'

'I'll join you,' she said.

He went to a corner cupboard and brought out a bottle and glasses. The glass he handed her was three-quarters full. She accepted it from him without comment.

'I take it neat,' he said, 'but I'll fetch water if you'd like it.'

'Neat is all right,' she said.

She raised her glass to him.

'Here's to finding what you seek.'

'The same to you.'

They drank, then she said, 'I don't seek any more. I just want to go along, quietly, being a bit useful and feeling a few people are glad I'm around and will miss me when I go.'

'Go where?'

'Wherever we do all go when we die in the body.'

'There's nothing to go, and nowhere to go to, so far as I'm concerned.'

'When I was a little girl I used to wonder where the flame of the candle went when you blew it out.'

'It can be scientifically explained.'

'Perhaps the survival of personality after death can be, too.'

'I doubt it. I'll personally be as mad as hell if I find myself alive after I'm dead! One life's enough. Ample. More than.'

He emptied his glass and recharged it as heavily.

'I drink,' he stated as he rejoined her.

She made no comment.

'You should disapprove,' he said, aggressively.

She smiled. 'Why?'

'I don't know. It's the correct moral line. What do *you* do?'

'Do?'

'To keep on living.'

'Oh—that!'

'Yes, that!'

She laughed.

'It's now my turn to anticipate disapproval. I'm afraid I don't do anything but work. This work with the deaf-blind is something I deeply care about, and it absorbs me—completely. I hope it doesn't sound priggish.'

'No. But you must relax sometimes. What do you do then—make nice cups of tea?'

'No. Coffee. Just as disastrous for the liver as whisky, I assure you. For the rest I read, I listen to music, see a few friends. There's not a lot of time anyhow.'

'I just drink. It saves trouble.'

He drained his glass.

'Gavin would be disappointed if he knew how much I drink at times. He thinks I'm the next thing to God—except that he's not quite sure if he believes in God any more.'

He lit a cigarette.

'Out of deference to you I won't have a third.'

'What does drink do for you?'

He looked at her through the cigarette smoke.

'I won't play that one.'

'I'm sorry. I thought we were friends. That you trusted me.'

'I do. I trust you not to disapprove or judge. What I don't trust is myself—that I won't play for pity. The thing I have a horror of—for myself or others.'

'Pity has a human face,' she suggested.

'Too damned human! It's what I complain of. Collectively I loathe the human face. Give me cats, every time!'

'Apropos,' she said, 'you'll take Minnaloushe with you to Ireland?'

'Of course. But why should we be exiled like that? Just to escape a pestering journalist!'

'She's more than that. She's evil. Gavin has a right to be protected from her.'

'Deliver us from evil! But who ever is? You can give up travelling by 'plane to avoid being killed in a crash, only to be run over by a bus. Some people call it Fate. Gavin does. For him everything is just chance. He's deaf-blind because he had the bad luck to contract meningitis.'

'What do you think yourself?'

'Oh—me, I've no theories about life, as I told Gavin. I only know from experience that side-stepping one thing you land in another.'

He paused, regarding her, waiting for her comment; when none came he continued, 'There was a story that impressed me strongly when I was a boy. About a king who had been warned by a wise man at his court that Death was coming for him on a certain day. Greatly alarmed the king called for his horse and rode away, out of his kingdom, into another land. Halting at a cross-roads he saw

another horseman approaching. This horseman reined in across his path, and the king looked into his face and knew that it was Death who had ridden out to meet him—on the appointed day.'

He got up and went over to the window and closed it, then stood there, stroking the cat still perched on the sill and peering out into the night.

'With which cautionary tale,' Clare said, with a smile, placing her emptied glass on the table under the lamp, 'we will call it a night!'

She got up.

'I'll say good night,' she added.

'Won't you join me in another drink?'

'No, thank you. Good night.'

'Good night, then. Thank you for bearing with me.'

'A friend is someone you can talk to!'

She turned back from the door to say it, smiling, but he had turned away and was pouring himself another drink, and she went out, closing the door softly behind her.

He carried his glass and the bottle over to where she had sat, by the lamp, set them down on the table and sank into the armchair. He recharged the glass several times and presently fell asleep. He was wakened in the small hours by Minnaloushe scrambling up into his lap for warmth.

He got up and stood for a few moments looking at the long streaks of crimson splitting the eastern sky and at the emerging glimmer of the sea, pale in the grey light. Thick white mist lay like a cloud in the valley of the estuary, obscuring everything but the tree-tops. Tomorrow had become today.

With the cat in his arms he went out of the room and slowly mounted the stairs to where in a drugged sleep lay the human being who was his only reason for living.

He switched on the light and still holding Minnaloushe looked down at the boy. Gavin lay on his right side, with his left arm curved round the pillow, hugging it to him.

The tired bitterness in Laurence's face melted in tenderness.

Deliver us from evil!

An atheist's prayer. There might be something to be said for the Irish exile.

PART TWO

The Uncreated Light

'Touching my darkness with soft kindling fingers . . .

HERBERT PALMER

I

VIVIEN and Maureen found the Connemara cottage together. After she had talked on the telephone to Laurence on the Sunday Vivien put through a call to the Villa Napoli and talked first to her mother-in-law and then to Maureen. Privately Maureen could not see why if Gavin had to go into hiding for a time—and she agreed there might be a case for it—he had to go all the way to Ireland for the purpose; there must surely be remote places in England, and if his address was kept secret he could live anywhere. But she endorsed the idea enthusiastically because it would be exciting to have Laurence within reach. When he had sailed back to England with Gavin at the end of the fortnight's holiday she had wondered, desolately, whether they would ever meet again and decided that they probably wouldn't. She suggested that Vivien should come over and that they should drive about in the West together. The idea appealed very strongly to Vivien; it appeased her sense of responsibility and made her feel less excluded from her son's life.

Maureen admired Vivien immensely; she thought her extremely good-looking in spite of the fact that she was going on for forty, and she envied her her clothes—not merely the clothes themselves but her ability to choose them. She also admired the way she had got on, from being just a girl in an office to becoming Lady Hayton. There was nothing wrong in marrying money if you had the chance and were able for it—especially if it was a second marriage and you had married for love the first time. She was convinced that she herself would be doomed to be an old maid, because all the men she attracted didn't interest her romantically, and the one who did seemed almost to dislike her. She was twenty-one—and in love for the first time; all her teens had been wasted;

she decided that she was emotionally retarded, which she supposed meant that you were a bit backward where the opposite sex was concerned, but it sounded more important put like that.

Vivien liked the girl, in an offhand sort of way. She thought her pretty, in a childish, wild-Irish-girl manner, and that she could be a good deal more attractive if she dressed properly. But she was a nice girl, and there was something in her smile, a certain sweetness, which reminded her of Terry. She condescended slightly to her, confident that despite the twenty years difference in their ages she, the married woman, mother of a boy of eighteen and a child of two, was the more attractive female, better-looking and possessed of a better figure and vastly more charm. She overlooked the simple fact that youth has a quality, an allure, peculiarly its own.

They drove across Ireland, East to West, in Maureen's sports' car, through flat uninteresting pasturelands, lunched well at the old town of Athlone in the middle, and reached Galway city, with its Salmon Bridge and weir, its grey university buildings and tall old trees and narrow streets, and its vast luxurious tourist hotel. It was Vivien's idea that they should do themselves well and take a pent-house suite overlooking the Bay, with the hills of Clare shadowy in the distance, and the sun sinking with such dramatic splendour into the sea that it might have been a tourist spectacle laid on specially by the management.

Maureen was entirely entranced by everything; it was really wonderful what you could do with money, she reflected; you could even, it seemed, buy yourself a sunset for dinner.

Vivien conceded that the Irish were bucking their ideas up a bit. No such splendour had been available when she had visited the West with Terry some twenty years ago; she had recollections of brass bedsteads in large bleak bedrooms with linoleum on the floors, and windows draped with dingy lace. She was more impressed than she would have dreamed of admitting, and it was satisfactory that Maureen undisguisedly found everything so wonderful.

In the morning they drove out of Galway, along the Corrib, through Oughterard with its beech trees and cascading stream,

and across the golden-brown bogs and into what seemed the very heart of bare blue mountains and entered that wild region of lakes and bogs and peninsulas and islands which is Connemara. The roadside hedges were still crimson with fuchsia and Vivien remembered seeing it all for the first time with Terry, when she was the same age as the girl at her side, and was suddenly overcome with nostalgia for lost youth, the ability to be unashamedly impressed, excited about things, and in love. That above all. What was really wonderful about money, it suddenly came to her, was what it *wouldn't* buy.

They lunched in a hotel beside a wild stretch of coast where golden seaweed decorated grey boulders, and behind wild mountainy land with here and there a white cottage which seemed to have sprung up from the earth itself like the rocks and boulders and outcrops of gorse and heather. The sun shone and the sea was very blue, with long white lines of breakers crowding in from the Atlantic.

The hotel was small and comfortable and the food good; they took rooms on the seaward side and decided to stay a few days and conduct their search from there.

'How do you suppose we set about finding a place?' Vivien asked.

'We drive around and ask,' Maureen said, confidently.

On the third day they found a small whitewashed cottage on a lake five miles from the town of Derrygimlagh which was no more than a single main street, a Catholic church, and about forty dark little bars tucked away at the back of dark little shops—grocery shops, hardware shops, bicycle shops, and shops that sold sweets, rosary beads, handknitted socks and sweaters, postcards, root vegetables, and ice-cream, all crowded together in one tiny space. Galway city was some sixty miles away; there was no railway station, but there was a bus to Galway in the morning and in the late afternoon, and a morning and evening bus out from Galway, the journey going by a devious route to cover a number of places and taking three and a half hours, allowing for halts for refreshment at licensed premises en route. ('How long will we be watin' here, Paddy?' 'Ah, sure, long enough. Take your time.')

The cottage had been originally built, some fifty years ago, to be part of a smallholding, but what with the young ones going away to England and America, and the old ones dying off, it had for some years been used only as a place to let furnished to summer holiday visitors. There was no electricity or piped water, and it was sparsely and shabbily furnished. But it stood on rising ground and overlooked mountains and water, and a crumbling, ivy-covered, castellated old house known locally as the Castle. Mr. Mangan, who owned Derrygimlagh Castle owned most of the land in the district, on which he raised cattle and sheep, sent up to the good pasturelands of the midlands in due course to be fattened up for their journey to England which finished in the abattoirs of Birkenhead. He kept hay in the drawing-room of the Castle, which he had at one time hoped to sell, to a rich American, or an Englishman, even, or a religious order, but there had been no offers and it was now slowly disintegrating. The cottage was on Castle land; it found tenants every July and August, but he wanted to sell the place, not wishing to be bothered with it. He was not interested in property, but only in land. He would sell it lock, stock and barrel for five hundred pounds.

'Would they like it here?' Vivien wondered. 'It's terribly isolated . . .'

'They could have a boat,' Maureen said, vaguely.

'What would Laurence do here?'

'The first few months he'd have plenty to do just doing the place up and making a garden. He likes being solitary, anyway.'

'And Gavin, of course, doesn't much care where he is so long as he's with Laurence.' There was a slight bitterness in Vivien's voice which was not lost on the girl.

'Don't you think all people like that come to depend on just one person?'

'I suppose so. It's just so sad that it had to be a stranger.'

Her eyes filled with tears, as always, when she thought how sad it was for her that her son's affliction should more or less exclude her from his life. She would never be reconciled to the fact, she told herself, passionately; never.

Maureen, at a loss what to say, embarrassed by the outburst, changed the subject.

'Why not telephone Laurence tonight and tell him about the cottage and see how he feels about it?' she suggested.

After a good dinner and a good deal to drink Vivien put through the call to Devon. She felt pleasantly flushed and relaxed, no longer irritated by the fact that Maureen persisted in drinking something called Club Orange night after night, no longer feeling excluded from her son's life, but, on the contrary, deeply—and cosily—involved in the ordering of it.

When the call came through the line across the bogs and pasturelands of Ireland, and under the Irish sea, and from Liverpool to Devon, was remarkably clear, inclining her to be chatty and garrulous.

'Come to the point, honey,' Laurence said at last, when she drew breath. 'Or this call will cost you a fortune!'

She was immediately deflated; she resented being called 'honey', particularly in that curt tone, and her mood swung over immediately to hostility.

'The point is,' she said, sharply, 'we've found the ideal cottage—furnished and overlooking a lake and within easy reach of a small town. No mod con, of course, but magnificent scenery. And of course really secluded.'

'You bet,' Laurence said, drily.

'Well, that's what we're after, isn't it?'

'What are we supposed to do there?'

'Supposed to do? Gavin will write, I suppose, and you will have plenty to do just keeping the place going. You could make a garden here—grow potatoes and vegetables and things. Maureen would come and stay sometimes. And you could go there. The place is for sale, but we could rent it for a few months and see how you got on here. You'd better give in your notice at the hospital and come over as soon as you can. You could break the journey at Killiney, and Maureen would drive you out and help you get settled in. I'll have to get back.'

'You bet,' Laurence said again. 'You'd better not wait, anyhow,' he added, maliciously, 'for we'll be bringing Minnaloushe.'

'Bringing who?'

'The cat.'

'How ridiculous! You could easily get another one here.'

'Gavin happens to be fond of this one. All right. I'll discuss it with Gavin and write to his nibs. When do you get back? I suppose we might as well try it out.'

'Unless Gavin prefers either of the alternatives. 'Bye.'

Laurence was pleasantly surprised to find that though the Castle cottage—it apparently had no other name—was the usual three-roomed cottage, with a fair-sized centre room with an open hearth, designed to be used as a kitchen, and a bedroom opening off each side, a unique feature was a balcony extending along the front, overlooking the lake. Rough bouldery land dropped away below the balcony to a narrow road, which, narrowing to a lane, wound round and up to the back of the cottage and then on across a waste of heathery bog to join the main road into the town. On this balcony in past summers had hung the towels and bathing suits of the succession of families who rented the place. Here, Laurence thought, when he had finished the chores he could sit and watch whatever life there was on the road below—a straying donkey or bullock, perhaps, a man or a boy on a bicycle on his way to or from the bog, an old woman trekking into the town from some outlying cottage. Here Gavin could sit feeling the wind and sun on his face, breathing the smell of turf and heather, and writing his poems. It would be dull; deadily dull; magnificently so. Peace would come dropping slow here, or nowhere in the world.

It would be peace for Gavin, too, for now he would never be alone, enclosed in darkness and silence. Maureen must be encouraged to come and stay, often, to divert him mentally and emotionally from the disturbing memory of the pink-haired woman. Perhaps for the girl's visits it might be possible to find a couple of horses good enough for hacking over the bog. There would be no sailing here, but they could have a rowing-boat and go fishing for pollock. As for himself, there might be the occasional trip to Dublin, leaving Maureen in charge of Gavin. He could avoid the bars where he might be likely to run into Kay

Carter should she ever be over again—there were plenty of the other kind, where only men went, seedy, shambling men at that, mumbling in dark corners over tankards of porter, abusing the old country and defending her to the death.

It ought to work out. For those who have no future one place is anyhow as good—or bad—as another. This one might even be to the good. Gavin must surely be happier here and his creative urge find a new direction, a deeper fulfilment. Nothing else mattered. There was the poetic fire, and unpitying love. Nothing else.

GAVIN was at first rebellious and resentful.

'Because I'm like this why should I be bundled about from place to place whenever my mother and the Boss take it into their heads to shift me? Why should we be banished to the other side of Ireland? To Connaught or to hell Cromwell told the Irish people, didn't he? The Boss and my mother between them said practically the same to us! Just to gratify their snobbery—because they didn't like Kay Carter writing me up in her column! My mother doesn't like it known she was the Boss's secretary before she became *Lady Hayton*! What are we supposed to do here, stuck here at the back of beyond? We might as well be on a desert island!'

Laurence told him, 'You will write in peace here!'

Gavin said, violently, 'I don't need peace to be able to write poetry! I need to feel myself alive. Not buried alive! No one will ever come and see us here and we'll never go anywhere!'

'Maureen will visit us, and we can go to the Villa Napoli for Christmas. We can even go sometimes to London if you want to.'

'I don't want Maureen. I want Kay!'

'Her only use for you is for her column!'

'You say that because you don't like women, and you're jealous! You'd like me not to care for anyone but you!'

'That's unjust. I should be delighted if you and Maureen fell in love.'

'You say that because you know it's safe—that we're not likely to.'

Laurence pressed the boy's hand and got up.

'Don't go!' Gavin shouted, angrily. 'You've no right to treat me like this! You upset me and then go off and leave me sitting alone in the dark!'

As always his rage collapsed in tears of despair and self-pity and the declaration that he wished he were dead, that he might as well be.

Such scenes were recurrent, and would be, Laurence realized, for a long time yet. For years, perhaps; until he was adjusted to his condition, which at that time he was still a long way from being. In spite of short interludes of near-happiness he lived most of the time in a state of nervous tension, with hysteria always suppressed just below the surface, ready to erupt at the slightest emotional disturbance. Even when he was relaxed the smallest thing could destroy his tranquillity in a moment. Emotionally he was fragile-with-care, brittle as spun glass.

It was understandable. There was a continual fraying of his nerves, in the simplest actions of everyday, the fraying of continual frustration. Putting a new sheet of paper into the typewriter he would sometimes forget what he had last written, and Laurence was not always at hand to tell him. Reading Braille was still laborious for him; he had mastered the letters very quickly, but the contractions he found difficult to remember, because they were purely arbitrary, not governed by any rules, and he frequently despaired of ever being able to read in Braille with ease. It was the greatest of his frustrations, for sighted he had been a quick reader. Moving about he occasionally blundered into things and lost his bearings and it would have a nervously exhausting effect on him. He suffered a good deal of the time from nervous exhaustion.

All this Laurence understood very well, but his intellectual knowing did not always save him from being wounded by the things Gavin said in his tantrums. He despised himself for this weakness and for the most part succeeded in steeling himself against it; but he could nevertheless be caught with his defences down, vulnerable to the wild accusations of jealousy, possessiveness, inconsiderateness. The latter was the most deeply wounding, since he lived entirely for and through his accuser; the sense of injustice was not readily subdued—whatever the mind reasoned.

It took Gavin some months to reconcile himself to the Irish exile. It took him, in fact, Laurence realized, as long as it took to

get Kay Carter out of his blood. That the fever did finally subside was due very largely to Maureen's frequent and protracted visits. She would come ostensibly for a weekend and stay a week; come for a week and stay a fortnight—subtly encouraged by Laurence, an encouragement she knew to be made for Gavin's sake but which she was unable to resist.

When Laurence told her, 'It helps a great deal your being here,' she was filled with a sad happiness, happy to know that she was of service to Laurence, sad that her presence had no other significance for him. She longed for him to be glad to have her around for her own sake, independent of Gavin; yet it was something to know that she was of value, that her presence made the handling of Gavin easier for him. She had to remind herself that Gavin himself was helped by her being there, and was ashamed that this had become of secondary importance to her.

'And I used to be so fond of Gavin,' she would think, sadly, in these moments of self-accusation.

Then she would tell herself that she was still very fond of him, and it was true; she had great affection and tenderness for him. When she came to think about it she loved him dearly. But she did not have to think about what she felt for Laurence; it was there all the time, a restless longing that never let up; it tormented you, yet you had no wish to be free of it, but cherished it as something precious, something wonderful. And that it was all hopeless made no difference. Only, of course, nothing was ever quite hopeless. It was something that Laurence anyhow liked her and valued her and had got as far as admitting it.

To himself Laurence admitted that he had come to like her more than he had ever expected to like anyone so innocent. She was a good girl. It was a pity—for them both, perhaps—that he was not physically or emotionally drawn to good girls. No, not a pity for her, he corrected the thought instantly; for her it was a lucky escape. However much she might suffer by his sexual indifference to her anything else could only be a disaster. He even thought he should find an opportunity to tell her this; but decided against it; it would only create a situation between them by bringing it all out into the open; better to leave it as it was, unacknowledged. But

it was ironic, and sad, that when at last in all the arid years someone did him the honour of falling in love with him—and it was surely always an honour to have someone in love with one—it should be this little innocent. What on earth was the attraction? It could only be that he was something different in her world. Something fascinatingly different. The pleasant extroverted young men she went riding and dancing with in her own world were so very ordinary; he gathered from odd things she said that outside of these pursuits they bored her, that to not one of them had she ever felt herself drawn. It was all a very great pity; but in his experience most things in life were that.

Maureen went to a great deal of trouble, in those first few difficult months, to help Gavin overcome his resentment at being banished, as he persisted in thinking of it. The weather was against her, for it rained continuously, for days and weeks, an endless soft weeping rain that seemed as though it could go on for ever. Through this rain she went walking with Gavin, when he grew tired of being confined to the house, taking him alone, to give Laurence a rest. Because life was all sensation for him he enjoyed this walking in the rain, and once when they halted for her to tell him something on his hand reached up and touched her hair and was disappointed to find she was wearing a head scarf.

'I'd been thinking of you with your hair all spangled with the small rain,' he said, 'sequined over.'

She immediately removed the head scarf and put his hand up to feel her loosened hair.

She told him about the white-washed cottages with the blue mixed with the lime brought out by the rain, making them blue-washed. He smelt the turf fires in the cottages, brackish-sweet, like black treacle. She told him how the mountains had disappeared in the mist, till you think it was all one flat plain. About a heron perched on a tiny island in the middle of the lake; and the gulls and curlews and oyster-catchers. They leaned against stone walls and stood under dripping fuchsia hedges whilst she laboriously told him all this, spelling it out letter by letter on his hand. She had developed a fair speed, but it was laborious to her, still, and

mentally fatiguing. Yet even in the house, with the machine available, she would talk to him in this way, the live way, because he preferred it. Sometimes by the evening she would feel so exhausted that it would be an effort to remember the signs any more.

Laurence would offer her a drink and she would always refuse, and like Vivien, like all drinkers with non-drinkers, he would be irritated. Finally, once, to please him, she accepted a small whisky. She disliked the taste intensely and it did nothing for her except make her feel slightly sick. He never asked her again; he couldn't, he said, waste good liquor on her.

'I'm sorry,' she said humbly, and added, 'I must seem an awful bore to you!'

He said, harshly, 'Don't be a little fool!' and her world flowered again.

It was agreed that they must have a boat, and they drove about in Maureen's car inquiring at cottages because, she declared, that was the way it was done in those parts.

The Irish desire to please provided some amiable conversations and a wealth of misinformation, but finally they talked with a shopkeeper who really did know of someone who had a boat to sell, Paddy McManus, only he had it laid up now for the winter, and wouldn't they wait till the spring, and why would anyone want to take a boat out at this time of the year?

Under pressure of their insistence the shopkeeper explained that McManus lived in the broken-down cottage at the far end of the lake. They should say that Joe Ryan sent them.

They drove out to the other end of the lake and stopped at the collapsing wooden gate of a dilapidated cottage crouched a little above the road. From among a reddening creeper which straggled over the gable-end facing the lake a tiny loft window peered out like a watchful eye. The decaying roof thatch sprouted with grass and weeds; a missing chimney-pot had been replaced by a battered enamel bucket. A number of thin brown hens huddled dejectedly under untrimmed escalonia hedges.

Laurence left Maureen in the car with Gavin and got out and gingerly lifted the ramshackle gate, watched from the door of the

house by a slatternly woman, a brood of raggedy children, and a tall gaunt-looking man.

'Joe Ryan sent me,' Laurence announced, as he came up over the muddy ground. 'He says you have a boat you might like to sell.'

'A boat, is it?' McManus sounded as astonished as though he had been told he had a white elephant for sale.

'A rowing-boat,' Laurence elaborated. 'Joe Ryan seemed to think you didn't use it.'

McManus stared at the stranger with the famished eyes of a man who has never had enough of anything, of food or drink or luck or anything else. Laurence returned the look with recognition. 'I'd give you a good price,' he added.

The man looked across his land to the scarlet car in the lane beyond.

'You're the new people at the Castle cottage, aren't you?'

'That's right. Just the two of us. The young lady's only visiting.'

'Just you and the blind feller?'

'He's blind and deaf.'

'Blind and deaf, is it? Poor devil!'

'Ah, God love him!' the woman cried, suddenly. 'The *poor* creature!'

'It's for him we want the boat,' Laurence explained. 'It would be nice for him to go rowing in the lake, and perhaps do a bit of fishing with a line and spinner.'

'Ah, give it him, Paddy,' Mrs. McManus cried, in a very ecstasy of compassion.

McManus regarded the young man, his famished eyes gimletting into him.

'She's twelve foot,' he said.

'A handy size,' Laurence observed.

'Two pounds a foot, the price is,' McManus stated, in the same intense, almost threatening, fashion.

Laurence, who had expected the price to be about half that, said lightly, 'Well, let's have a look at her, anyway.'

'Wait now.'

McManus turned and pushed past his wife and the children grouped round her and went into the house. When he reappeared,

which was almost immediately, he looked different, Laurence thought, less haggard.

'Let's go,' McManus said. 'I have her laid up down below.'

Then Laurence realized that the reason why McManus looked different was that he was now wearing teeth, top and bottom.

Laurence called to Maureen, 'Don't wait. I'll walk back,' then followed McManus down over the grassy, bouldery land behind the cottage to a rough cart shed. The boat lay upended among sacks of potatoes and implements of various kinds.

'She's a fine craft,' her owner declared, adding, his eyes feverish, 'I'll give her to ye for twenty-five pounds.'

'Twenty-five?'

'Two pounds a foot and a pound luck-money.'

Laurence went over to the boat.

'Let's get her out and put her on the water. If she's not leaking we'll row her up to below the Castle and she can stay there.'

'How will the two of us put her on the water and she up here on the dry land?' It was not so much a question as a protest.

'The same way that you've always put her on the water.'

McManus groaned.

'Why would anyone be wantin' to put a boat on the water this time of the year? Wouldn't next May be time enough?'

'There's never time enough. That's the trouble. If you'll give me a hand moving these sacks of potatoes. . . .'

She wasn't much of a boat. She was leaky and you could drive a penknife into her sides as easily as into butter, and she was heavy to row. But she allowed herself to be rowed up the lake to the Castle ruins without sinking, and Laurence thought he could patch her up sufficiently. Also he thought he had never seen a man more desperately in need of twenty-four-pounds-and-a-pound-for-luck.

'Michael will give ye a hand paintin' her,' McManus said, when the deal was completed. 'Fifteen shillin's a day he earns in the town, but I'll give him ye for ten.'

Michael was fifteen, a thin freckled lad with a ready smile which bared his gums. Laurence was not in need of his services but had no heart to send him away; he stayed around like a lost

famished dog. Laurence rigged up a shelter down at the water's edge and he and Gavin and Michael worked there on the boat, out of the rain. Maureen, who by then had been there a fortnight, decided it was time she went home. With the excitement over the boat she had the feeling that her departure was barely noticed.

It was not quite true; they were too busy to miss her during the day but in the evenings the place seemed to both of them curiously empty without her.

It helped Gavin that he had been able to work on the boat, playing his part in a normal activity. Young Michael got used to him and sufficiently overcame his shyness to write words in capital letters in the palm of his hand. Then the other children began to come and learned not to be shy of him or scared by him but to accept him. He came to know them by touch; they took his hands, affectionately, and the youngest clambered over him, and he felt himself part of a group instead of isolated in darkness and silence. When the work on the boat was finished they started coming up to the house and were a nuisance, interrupting Gavin when he was writing, and sending Minnaloushe rushing for cover, away from their shrieks and yells.

There seemed nothing for it but to lock them out. When he was working outside Laurence would lock the door so that they couldn't get in, and when they came clambering up over the rough ground from the lane, all eagerness, he would tell them to run along, that he was busy. Sometimes they came bearing gifts, a few eggs—'Mammy sent ye these,'—a tin of blackberries gathered along the lanes, devil's blackberries, gathered too late in the year—or 'a head of cabbage for ye dinner', and once a rabbit—'Dadda was out shootin' a few.' Laurence felt mean taking their gifts and sending them away; they stood looking at him, baffled, and it seemed to him he had to shoo them away as though they were so many hens, and he felt more than mean; he felt terrible, all his own desolate childhood surging back. But they had each other, he told himself, harshly; and they had parents. Nevertheless he saw—or seemed to see—in their faces, already, that intolerable hungry look. The look of the deprived.

The news of the newcomers spread quickly to the town and the few outlying cottages; it made an interesting bit of local gossip—upon which the community thrived, having little else—but nothing more. The only person to call was the Reverend Hawthorn, the Protestant parson who hurried out on his bicycle and was mistaken by Laurence for the parish priest. Laurence apologized for this and then proceeded to administer another shock by saying that he and his young friend were atheists. The Reverend Hawthorn, who knew all the best Protestant families for miles around, used to dealing, that is to say, with the Quality, had never in all his ministration met with so brutal a rebuff. He was so taken aback that he did, Laurence observed, literally sway from the impact of the eight-letter word.

‘Oh dear!’ he said, and then, helplessly, as the first wave of shock retreated, ‘I suppose it takes all sorts to make a world!’

Then, clumsily, still not quite himself, mounted his bicycle and rode the five miles back. His journey, however, was not entirely wasted, as it provided another little item of local gossip and effectively struck the newcomers off the Protestant calling list. The Catholics were not concerned one way or the other; there was a certain satisfaction in the knowledge that though the newcomers were not of the Catholic faith they were also not practising Protestants either, and as to ‘calling’ those in the town being shopkeepers didn’t reckon to, and those outside only reckoned to call on each other, mainly to borrow things. Though once an old woman in a shawl did call, ostensibly to leave a present of a few eggs and a welcome-to-Connemara, but in fact to see for herself the dark wonder of this of God’s creatures who could neither see nor hear, yet who could be talked to on his hand, so it was said, and who could read by feeling with his fingertips in specially printed books.

Soon after the purchase of the boat, too, Mrs. McManus washed her face and pulled a comb through her hair and threw an old raincoat on over her grimy skirt and jumper and walked the length of the lake and up to the balconied cottage to see for herself something of its wonders. (‘Mammy, there’s cairpit on all the floors,’ Michael had told her, ‘an’ shelves with books standin’ on

them, an' there's a press with a lookin' glass set into the door, the way you can see yourself from top to bottom!')

But the greatest wonder was Mr. Gavin who could read although he couldn't see, and be talked to although he couldn't hear. She brought a gift of a hare, and there was this time no talk of shooting; it had been taken from a snare that morning by her husband, who had killed it by bashing its head against an adjacent boulder. She had tied a bit of sacking round its head to absorb the blood. She had brought a few onions to cook with it, but it should be let hang for a few days before taking out its insides.

That anyone might be squeamish about skinning and paunching a hare, or a rabbit, or even not know how to set about it, could not have occurred to her. Though she had heard of people who couldn't kill a chicken to save their lives. Michael was a bit funny like that; his father had taken him to work for Mr. Mangan in the summer, killing sheep; he paid two-and-six a sheep, and when you got handy at it you could earn a good bit in the day. But Michael hadn't liked it, for some reason. He only went the one day. There was so much blood everywhere, he said. They had tried to make him. His father had even taken a stick to him. But it was no good. He had only cried and threatened to throw himself in the lake. So the good money to be earned wasn't earned, all because of a bit of blood.

She laid the hare and the onions on the table in the living-room, and watched fascinated whilst Laurence told Gavin that she had arrived, adding, 'I'll get rid of her as soon as I can. Just say hullo to her.'

'Hullo, Mrs. McManus,' Gavin said, smiling.

'Hullo, sir,' she said, and then clapped a hand to her mouth and turned in dismay to Laurence. 'But of course he can't hear! I forgot. And the way he looks at you with his bright blue eyes the way you'd think he could see you! God love the creature, isn't it a terrible thing?'

Laurence said briskly, 'It's surprising what people can get used to. It was kind of you to bring the hare. I mustn't keep you. . . .'

She gazed raptly about her, without budging.

'It's beautiful,' she breathed, on an indrawn breath, then,

exhaling, 'Ye've a long looking glass Michael was telling me——'
'I'll show you. Excuse me a minute——'

He went over to Gavin and told him, 'I'll show her each room and then out,' then returned to Mrs. McManus who was fingering the handwoven curtains at the window—a gift from Maureen. 'Come,' he said, and piloted her from one door to another, and then into the built-on kitchen. He demonstrated the calor-gas cooker to her, and assured her that no, there was no danger of blowing yourself up, then, as a means of getting her out of the house, said he would show her the kitchen garden he was making, and piloted her through the back door and into the open.

She was on her way back down the lane without quite realizing how it had happened.

Laurence returned to the house and went over to Gavin, who was playing with the cat.

He told him, 'I've got rid of her. She brought a hare up. I must go and hang it. We could have it Sunday—we don't want it high.'

'Do you mind seeing to it?'

'I do, rather. Too much like a cat.'

'I know. Did Paddy shoot it?'

'Yes,' Laurence said, though he knew otherwise, but there seemed no point in grieving the boy. 'I must find a place to hang it. Somewhere where we won't keep running into it. Why don't you sit on the balcony in the sun?'

Gavin got up and Laurence settled him on the balcony with his typewriter, then took the hare and went into the kitchen. He laid the corpse on the table and stood looking down at it, at the long ears sticking up from the blood-soaked sacking, the warm tawniness of the coat, the long runner's legs. A pretty thing, and so beautifully designed for running—a strong swimmer, too, though most people seemed not to know that—so admirably equipped for the life it had to live; its gentle, harmless life. But this one had to be trapped in a snare and after a night of pain and terror meet a day in which its skull was to be cracked against a stone. Now the little feet which had pelted with such speed over the fields and bogs and along the lanes were rigid with death, and in a few days would be cut off, the little delicate cat feet.

Today was Monday; any shooting or snaring the men and boys intended doing was done on Sunday afternoon—the empty boring Sunday afternoon, when if you were not mooching about with a gun or looking for places to set snares what was there to do except lean up against a wall or a gate and wait for time to pass, or lean on a bridge and watch the water? Friday or Saturday he would take the hare down and lay it on the table and cut off its feet—hack them off at the joints, neatly, with a sharp knife, the little runner's feet. Then, delicately so as not to cut the flesh, slit up the soft under-belly of the coat, ease it back, gently work the legs out of the skin, cut off the head. Then slit the flesh of the belly, plunge in a hand, drag out the stinking viscera. But careful with the liver, and the little heart. The little heart pounding in swift flight from a dog or the crack of a gun.

He hadn't liked dealing with the rabbit the children had brought, but he had done so, and it had been duly cooked and eaten, Minnaloushe sharing. He had thought then that he could not do another. Now he was required to deal with a hare. And why be squeamish—the thing was dead, and working at the hospital he had many times performed more horrible tasks. Only it wasn't that; it wasn't the stinking viscera, but the fact of taking apart, like the inside of a watch, all the marvellously adjusted delicate organs which had constituted the living thing—a thing of beauty and grace and swiftness.

If it had been given to him already hung and paunched and trussed for the oven no such things would have come to him, he knew. He would have been spared the realization which now confronted him. This he acknowledged. But he had been so confronted. This was not jugged hare, smelling deliciously of wine and mushrooms and cloves; this was the corpse of an animal that had recently been alive, the blood still dribbling from its mouth, staining its russet coat.

He picked the dead hare up and carried it out into the garden and laid it in the grass under a fuchsia hedge whilst he dug a hole. He pulled yellowing bracken and purple loose-strife and lined the hole and laid the hare in, covered it with more bracken and loose-strife, then shovelled in the earth and trod it down. Then he went

back into the house, washed his hands, wiped the blood from the kitchen table, and went out on to the balcony to tell Gavin.

He told him, 'I've buried the hare under a hedge. Don't ask me why.'

Gavin said, 'I don't blame you. I couldn't skin a rabbit or a hare myself. I don't think I could even pluck a chicken, let alone kill one.'

'It's not just that. It's the disgusting vandalism of treating the organs of an animal as though they were only bits of machinery. I hated doing the rabbit. I found I couldn't have anything at all to do with the wretched hare except give it back to the earth.'

'What about all the poor beasts slaughtered for meat and their livers and kidneys and hearts and tongues set out on trays in the butchers' shops?'

'It's all disgusting. I don't want anything to do with any of it any more. There's plenty to eat without eating the corpses of animals.'

'That's O.K. by me. I've often thought it beastly and wished we didn't. But what do we do when we go to Grandma's? They'll never understand. They'll just think us cranks.'

'Does it matter what they think?'

'Not really.' He paused and smiled. 'Poor little hare! It didn't die in vain after all, did it? Hodgson would have made a poem about it. Perhaps I can . . .'

He spent a week working on the poem—the week, Laurence reflected, the hare was to have hung—and it was to turn out easily his best work to date, and the beginning of a new series. The feverish disturbance set up by Kay Carter was gradually replaced by a strong creative fever.

Laurence dug the wild land and planted bulbs for the spring. On the mild still autumn days, of which there were a number, they took the boat out, not bothering with fishing lines, content to potter about among the islets, Laurence watching herons and the other water birds, Gavin resting on his oars for Laurence to tell him about them. The McManus children came and went and sometimes Michael was sent to work in the garden, whether he was wanted or not, always at the cut rate, though it was invariably a cut day, too, Laurence noticed. He was told not to bring any more

rabbits or hares, 'Because we don't eat such things any more. We don't like things killed.'

To Laurence's surprise the boy replied that he didn't either, and told about his day's work for Mr. Mangan.

'My dad bate me when I wouldn't go back,' he confided. 'He bate me so much that it hurted when I sat down. But I wouldn't go. I told Father Riley about it and he said I did wrong to disobey my father, because God put the animals into the world for our use. He said one of their uses was to provide us with food. Do you believe that, Mister?'

Laurence looked down into the serious upturned freckled face.

'I do not!' he said, firmly, adding, 'I would have asked Father Riley what made him suppose God had any such idea!'

The boy looked troubled.

'It's hard to understand some things. God put rats into the world, but they're bold destroyin' things, no good to anyone. My dad gets our dog to corner them, then he bashes them with a stick. But I don't like seein' it.'

'Evil has to be destroyed. That's different.'

'Could you kill a rat, Mister?'

'I expect so—if I had to.'

'Bash it on the head so that the blood spurted out?'

'If there was no other way, and if I hated it enough!'

The anxiety of the freckled face dissolved into a grin of admiration.

'Aren't ye great now?' the boy cried.

To an older person Laurence would have retorted, 'Because I confess myself capable of an act of violence?' To the boy he made no answer but merely smiled and redirected the interest to the work in hand, which was the relatively non-violent operation of sawing logs.

3

IN AN existence in which very little ever happens, certainly nothing remarkable, in a country in which there is always 'time enough', and which is out of the main stream of world events, the seasons dissolve into each other, and the years melt away, and time, curiously enough, never drags its feet. At the end of the first year, all having gone well, that is to say Gavin having evidently settled down, Hayton bought the freehold of the cottage and came out with Vivien to settle the deal with Mangan in person. To Gavin's immense relief they did not attempt to stay at the cottage; they took a pent-house suite in the vast Galway hotel and drove out in the afternoon, taking the young men by surprise. Vivien had written to Gavin from England that they would be coming over that month, 'to settle the business about the cottage', but had been vague as to dates. They had paid a brief courtesy call at the Villa Napoli on the way out to the West and Maureen had recommended sending a wire to Laurence to say they were on the way, but Hayton wouldn't hear of it.

'If we let them know we're coming they'll get themselves and the place all spruced up and we'll never have any real idea of their normal life,' he insisted.

With this Vivien agreed, thinking, with the old bitterness, that Gavin would only work himself up into a nervous state if he knew they were coming.

They suggested that Maureen should accompany them, but she was only recently back from a visit to Derrygimlagh and did not feel she could go again so soon. Also by staying behind she could warn Laurence of the impending invasion, and immediately the Haytons had gone she wired him that they were on the way

to Galway and would be going out to see them the following afternoon.

The wire arrived at the post-office of the little town in the late afternoon; the postmaster took the message himself and wrote it out and laid it aside for delivery by post next morning unless—which was unlikely—someone should be calling in and going out that way that evening. There was no delivery service for telegrams outside the town; when people were on the telephone any wires arriving for them were telephoned, but there was no telephone at the Castle cottage and neither of its occupants wished for one, agreeing that it was more peaceful without it.

The postman usually reached the cottage around mid-day—it depended how many bars he visited in the town before leaving and how long he gossiped at each place he called at. The day of the Hayton visit he was rather more than usually late and rather more than usually garrulous with drink. He leaned against the wall of the cottage whilst he shuffled through batches of letters to see which were for the 'young master', talked a good deal of vague nonsense, with veiled references to 'the powers that be', and finally departed with knowing nods and winks—and the telegram still in his wallet, along with the receipts for registered letters and parcels which he usually collected several days after delivering them.

Laurence was still Brailleing the letters for Gavin when the Haytons arrived. They had had to walk up from the point at which the lane curved round to climb up behind as it was impossible to turn so wide a car in so narrow a space. Hayton was panting with the unaccustomed exertion, and Vivien had suffered considerably on the rough road in her flimsy pencil-heeled shoes. Laurence had heard the car in the lane below the house, but in the summer quite a number of tourists drove out from the town to the lake, and even when the car stopped he attached no significance to the fact; cars often stopped at that point and the occupants got out and toddled a few steps along the lake and took photographs, then toddled back exhausted with so much walking, and drove on again. He watched them sometimes from the balcony and described them to Gavin; but that afternoon he was too busy

transcribing the letters for Gavin to read as they came up on the Braille tape of the Arcaid.

Then suddenly Gavin started.

'I can smell a cigar!'

In the same moment Laurence heard steps approaching the balcony and a high, clear feminine voice he immediately recognized as Vivien's called, 'Is anyone at home?'

He just had time to take Gavin's hand and tell him quickly on it 'Your mother is here and the Boss,' before Vivien turned the corner of the house on to the balcony, with the burly figure of Sir James behind her.

Gavin had scrambled to his feet and sensed the movement and confusion swirling about him, then felt his mother's hands taking his and her scented face and soft lips brushing against his cheek, then his stepfather's hand gripping his, strongly.

Laurence took the boy's hand to tell him, 'They're only staying an hour. Bear with them. Your mother is obviously nervous. Minna has fled.'

The visit passed off remarkably well. Vivien made an effort not merely to make conversation with Gavin but to reach through to him. She declared that it was 'lovely to see you again,' and told him how little Peter had grown, and gave him news of Helga, who had married at Christmas and was expecting a baby. She said how much she had liked some of his recent poems—'especially the one about the hare'—and when he, in turn making an effort to be gracious, remarked on her perfume and that it was not her usual one she took her handkerchief out of her handbag and had him smell it and told him the name and maker of the perfume. She brought him a present of a box of silk handkerchieves, very soft and fine and, he guessed, fearfully expensive. They came, she told him, happily, from a very good shop in Bond Street. She brought him also a bottle of a very good eau-de-cologne from the same very good shop. His evident appreciation of her gifts made her happy. She had devoted a good deal of thought as to what to give him, and chosen things which she felt would afford him the pleasures of touch and smell. She felt closer to him than she had felt since the terrible thing had happened to him three years ago.

It helped, too, that he read Braille quicker than when she had first used the Arcaid on that upsetting Devon visit.

Hayton insisted on what he called 'having a bash at' the machine.

'This is a great invention,' he banged out, and having achieved that was at a loss what to say next. He looked helplessly from Vivien to Laurence.

'Difficult to think on a machine,' he mumbled.

'Ask him about his work,' Vivien suggested.

'That's an idea!'

'When's the next magnum opus coming out?' he typed.

Gavin replied that he hoped to publish some new poems in the spring. Laurence gripped his hand for a moment. He knew it meant, 'don't let him rattle you'.

Having made this effort with his stepson Hayton then marched about the place shrewdly appraising it inside and out; it was solidly built, he pronounced, pity they hadn't thought to include a damp course; what about getting the electricity installed, and then getting the water pumped up and some plumbing fixed up?

'That is to say, if you're going to make a go of it here,' he concluded, eyeing Laurence as shrewdly as he had eyed the property.

Laurence said, simply, 'I promised Gavin I would stay with him as long as he wanted me to.'

'You don't get bored with the life here?'

'There's no time to be bored. There's a good deal to do—one way and another.'

He didn't feel inclined to go into the details. Hayton wasn't interested anyhow, he felt. He only wanted to be reassured he wasn't going to get his stepson back on his hands one of these days.

'You're doing a good job here,' Hayton said, warmly. Then, as Laurence offered no comment, 'You're all right for money?'

'Yes. I'll show you what I've been doing outside . . .'

He showed Hayton the neatly stacked turf, the pile of sawn logs against the gable of the house, the kitchen garden, the flowering shrubs he had planted out in the rough land round the house.

'Good man, good man!' Hayton applauded.

They went back into the house and Laurence made tea and Hayton, determinedly useful, carried plates of bread-and-butter and cake out to the balcony, where Vivien was still using the Arcaid to talk to Gavin.

The visit lasted about two hours. When they left Laurence and Gavin walked with them down the lane to the massive car.

'Gavin seems much happier,' Vivien told Laurence.

'I think he is. Maureen's visits help. He still has bad days on and off.'

'He doesn't seem hostile to me any more!'

'He's not so much at war in himself.'

'Of course it's wonderful for him having you.'

Laurence offered no comment; he took her arm to steer her down the steep dip of the lane to the road below, and was relieved when they reached the car.

When he and Gavin went back up the lane the boy said, laughing, 'Well, thank God that's over! Now perhaps we can get on with the mail. . . .'

The visit was not repeated. Vivien felt that it devolved upon her to see her son at least twice a year, but decided that there was completely no need to trek all across Ireland to do so; it had been necessary to go once, to assure herself that he was comfortable and happy in the Connemara cottage, but from now on the simplest arrangement would be to invite herself to the Villa Napoli when he was there. In discussing Gavin with her friends expediency became transmuted into something more lofty, something to do with not being a possessive mother. A young man didn't want his mother always trailing after him, she declared, and so long as she was sure he was all right she was perfectly content to leave him alone to lead his own life in his own way. Even as a little boy, she would say wistfully, he was always inclined to be rather independent and withdrawn. And of course, she would add, conscientiously generous, Laurence Oakes could do far more for him—and with him—than she could ever hope to; he was really rather a remarkable person, possessed of a true vocation for service.

The simplicity and humility she managed to convey in saying this turned it into a generously conceded admission, which with its implication of selfless love abdicating its own rights and claims for the greater good of the loved one subtly added to her own stature.

Neither Gavin nor Laurence were deceived as to her motives for meeting them henceforth at the Villa Napoli; it was obviously less trouble and more convenient for her, but the arrangement also suited them very well; Gavin favoured it because he always liked being at the Villa Napoli, infinitely preferring it to anywhere else; Laurence welcomed the arrangement simply because it made Gavin happy.

But he was always glad when the visit was over and they were aboard the Galway train—safely aboard, was how he always thought of it—heading steadily out across the flat fields and brown bogs to the West and the pleasant monotony of their days there. Beginning with the ticket-inspector on the train everyone, all the way, said 'Welcome back!' They never notified the McManus family of their return but within half an hour of their arrival, as soon as the smoke went up from their chimney, like a signal, a McManus child would be up with a few eggs—'Mammy sent these for ye'—a shy smile, and a welcome-back.

Gavin never shared Laurence's feeling of relief at being back. He always left the Villa Napoli with regret, and the wish that he could be there all the time. It would always be home for him. At the cottage, though he had come to accept the life there, he never quite overcame the sense of isolation, of banishment. He did not feel it when Maureen was there, but when she had gone it would close in on him again and he would be depressed and despairing. Only the sensation of Minnaloushe weaving herself round his legs as soon as they got back to the cottage reconciled him to what he still thought of as the return to exile. As soon as they were inside the house and he had seated himself she would jump up into his lap; he would put his fingers on her throat and feel her purring, and run his hands along her back and feel how thin she had got, in McManus care, in their absence.

Winter was the most difficult time, with the endless rain, and fearful gales driving in from the Atlantic, causing the house to

vibrate. Then the monotony of confinement to the house was not even leavened by the arrival of a McManus with a solitary egg as propitiation for a shyly requested 'loan' of a 'weeshy little bit' of sugar or tea.

During his fits of depression Gavin would demand why couldn't they clear out and go to the Villa Napoli—where there was some life? It never occurred to him that there was a good deal less life there for Laurence than at the cottage. Laurence would reply, patiently, that they couldn't always be running to the Villa Napoli, that they hadn't, so far as he understood, a standing invitation.

'Then why doesn't Maureen come here?' Gavin would ask, petulantly.

'You can ask her,' Laurence would say.

Gavin would write to her and tell her that they were both 'dying of boredom', and wouldn't she come and save them alive. Laurence would sometimes add a postscript to the letter saying that if she was free to come it would be nice to see her and would help Gavin. But she was not always free to come; her grandfather would be laid up with an attack of lumbago and she couldn't leave Grandma to cope single-handed; or Grandma had flu and she couldn't leave her; or sometimes, heartlessly, there was a dance she was set on going to next weekend, or a party at the house, and she had a lot to do getting ready for the occasion.

'Isn't it happy for her?' Gavin would cry bitterly. 'What does she care if we just sit here and rot in the rain?'

Laurence would point out that Maureen was young and had her own life to live, and that she had already done the long trek out from Dublin several times that year. . . .

The dark moods passed like the dark days, and suddenly it would be spring again, with daffodils blooming on the wild land and the sun warm on the face, and a starved tom-cat turning up from God-knows-where to look hopefully at Minnaloushe, and Laurence feeling guilty because he had had her spayed before leaving Devon, partly because he disliked drowning kittens, partly because he realized the difficulty of finding satisfactory homes for the survivors in some remote place where cats were kept, if at all, for strictly utilitarian purposes and left to fend for themselves.

Minna would roll coquettishly on her back and the wretched male would prowel round, coming as close as he dared, wary of the sudden hiss which would be spat at him when fear put a stop to the rolling. Laurence would attempt to distract the tom with saucers full of bread-and-milk, but a tom-cat in March has only one relentless, driving compulsion, and Minna's frustrated suitors would hang around until the wind brought them hopeful news from some other quarter.

The publication of Gavin's second book of poems brought no television invitation—the deaf-blind boy-poet novelty had worn off—but it did produce a review in a Saturday night books programme in the B.B.C.'s Home Service, and some of the poems were read by Maurice Berring, as part of the review. He read them extremely well, because he had that rare gift, the ability to read poetry aloud, and because he was sincerely moved by the poems. There was no radio at the cottage because Laurence could not imagine himself listening with Gavin present to something the boy could not share, especially as before his illness he had enjoyed listening to music. He Brailled the review for Gavin from the *Listener*, sent to him by Maurice, and Clare wrote to tell Gavin how beautifully the poems had been read, and how much she had enjoyed them. She wrote direct to the cottage, as did Berring, for Gavin had refused to have all his mail sent to London, to be forwarded by his mother. The B.B.C. wrote to him care of Sir James Hayton, and for a time Merrion had done so, but when it came to a matter of proofs again Gavin rebelled and gave his publisher his Irish address.

Gavin longed for Clare to visit them, but her work did not permit of it; such holidays as she took she spent with groups of deaf-blind people, taking them on holiday to the sea. Berring talked on and off of holidaying 'next year' in Connemara, but when the time came he capitulated to his wife, who insisted that with only a fortnight in the year they must go where they could be sure of the sun. He had married since he had visited Gavin in Devon and whether he would have gone to Connemara had he remained single he didn't know; he had his own hankering after the sun. Sometime perhaps, he wrote Gavin, they could meet in

Dublin. . . . It was all very vague and Gavin had no belief in it. He accepted that his friendship with Berring, as with Hugh Ross, would have to be maintained through correspondence. He did live, to a considerable extent, through letters, but there were times when he longed intensely for the actual presence . . . and to be able to hear what was said to him, and see the face of the speaker. That anguish of longing never left him; it was a pain always lying in wait to leap out on him and torture him—at times almost beyond endurance. Fortunately most of the time, although it was always there, below the surface, it was quiescent, a numb ache. And always, narrowly suppressed, that other longing, of which he never spoke and which he barely acknowledged, but which sometimes in the blackness of the nights raged in him until he would feel that of that, too, he could die.

VIVIEN proposed that Gavin's twenty-first birthday should be celebrated at the Villa Napoli and she and James would come over. Maureen would perhaps invite some of her Dublin friends and they could have a real party of young people. But for once Gavin had no wish to go to his grandparents and his mother's suggestion infuriated him.

'Anything to save herself trouble!' he shouted. 'What sort of party would it be for me with Maureen's friends enjoying themselves and trying not to notice the skeleton at the feast! Can't you just see them all, staring at me, feeling sorry for me, embarrassed by me because they don't know how to talk to me? But of course that wouldn't occur to my dear mother! All she can think of is a jolly party with no trouble to herself! If there's to be any celebrations they'll take place in London where I can meet the people who mean something to me—Clare, and dear old Maurice. We might even get Hugh Ross along, and Mr. Merrion.'

When the boy had finished ranting Laurence told him on his hand, 'I agree it should be a party of your own friends, but it would mean staying at your mother's. You always hated it.'

'I hated it because of him, but I've got over that. I hated the thought of my mother being married to him, sleeping with him. That rich fat old thing taking my father's place. But I don't care any more. I'd hate to live there with the two of them, but I don't mind staying there for a few days, having my twenty-first birthday there and the few people I care about along. We could walk in Regent's Park again. I'd like to smell and feel old London again. And Clare. Such wonderful hands she has, and that smell of violets always. There's something very special about Clare!'

Laurence told him, 'I think so, too. All right, write to your mother and see what happens.'

'If she doesn't agree why don't we go to London anyhow? Clare would find us some small hotel where we could stay and we could have a little party there.'

'Your mother would be very upset.'

'Who cares?'

'Write nicely to her,' Laurence urged.

Gavin did nothing of the kind. He wrote a very violent letter accusing his mother of selfishness, inconsiderateness, lack of imagination. He would celebrate his birthday in London, if not at her house then in a hotel. He wanted his own friends around, not Maureen's, or anyone else's. He put the letter into an envelope and sealed it, without showing Laurence. He scrawled the address across it and asked Laurence to hand it to the postman in the morning with his other mail.

'I trust you,' he added.

Laurence told him, 'You had better keep it and hand it to the postman yourself. You might change your mind and write a letter you wouldn't mind me seeing.'

Gavin asked bitterly, 'Am I never allowed a private letter? Just because you have to read all my incoming ones must you read all my outgoing ones too?'

'I'm sorry,' Laurence said, and meant it. I had no right, he thought. Love has no rights. It has only its flawed self.

Vivien was deeply wounded by Gavin's letter, and Hayton when shown it was very indignant. Even allowing for the frustrations and depressions of his affliction, he declared, the boy had no right to behave in that offensive fashion. It looked as though a couple of television appearances and a few good press notices had given him a swelled head. He had a good mind to stop his allowance and let him learn to shift for himself; he might then acquire a little appreciation of, and gratitude for, all that had been done for him. Etc. etc.

The more her dear James—dear good kind James—sympathized with her and was indignant on her behalf the more she wept,

luxuriating in self-pity, a sense of injustice, and his unfailing protectiveness. When she was drained of tears—and no one can cry for ever, or even for long—she wrote Gavin a more-in-sorrow-than-anger letter designed to arouse remorse in him, but which in fact only aroused his contempt.

'She was always good at the after-all-I've-done-for-you line,' he told Laurence. 'What exactly has she done for me? Carted me round to a few doctors—but that was as much for her own sake as for mine. She didn't want to be burdened with a deaf-blind son all her life if she could help it!'

'You're not quite fair to her,' Laurence protested.

'Was she fair to me when she married old Hayton?'

You would have resented whoever she married, Laurence thought. He said, 'You would have had a harder time if she hadn't.'

Gavin snatched his hand away.

'You're never on my side these days, for some reason!'

Then, as he felt the movement of Laurence getting up, 'Where are you off to?'

'Don't you want me to Braille the mail for you?'

'Yes, of course.' Then, pressing Laurence's hand and smiling, 'Please!'

There was a good deal of such April weather in their relationship; Laurence accepted it with an outward patience and only an occasional indulgence in an inward bitterness. It was a relief to him that in spite of her son's savage letter Vivien was prepared to have them both at the Regent's Park house and entertain Gavin's few friends. He felt that he had had enough of the Anglo-Irish atmosphere, and in London, with Clare available to be with Gavin for the odd hour or two, he would have the chance to look up some of the deaf-blind people he used to visit in the days before Gavin became his life's work. He would be glad to escape from that house occasionally, he thought. He wished Vivien could be dissuaded from giving the formal dinner party she seemed to think the occasion required and suggested to Gavin that on his birthday he just had his friends come in at all hours, informally; surely this would be easier to cope with and he would prefer it?

To his surprise and dismay Gavin said that he would like a dinner party. 'With candles and champagne and splendid things to eat and dancing afterwards.' His mother should ring up Maurice and Mr. Merrion and Hugh Ross at once and invite them with their wives, 'and you and Clare will make another pair, and Maureen must fly over to make a pair with me, and with my mother and the Boss we'll be a round dozen, which is quite a party!'

Laurence asked him, 'Is everyone supposed to dress up?'

'Oh, rather!' Gavin said, smiling happily.

'Then you'd better count me out. I don't possess even a dark suit.'

'We can both hire dinner jackets at Moss Bros.'

'Are you serious?'

'Of course I'm serious!'

'I'm sorry,' Laurence said, 'but the thought of wearing hired clothes makes me feel quite ill.'

'I think it would be great fun! I've never worn a dinner jacket. I'd love to!'

'I'd feel a fool.'

'Can't you do it just for once, for me? It's after all my twenty-first birthday! What did you do on yours?'

Laurence looked at the eager smiling face turned to him. He said aloud, '*On my twenty-first birthday I bashed the R.S.M. in his ugly mug and they put me in the glass-house.*'

On Gavin's hand he said, 'Sweet F.A.!'

Gavin laughed. 'That was bad luck. But it's no reason why I shouldn't have fun on mine, is it?'

'None at all,' Laurence said. 'All right. Whatever you like. Hired tuxedo and all. Greater love, etc.'

Maureen flew over from Dublin the day before; all the other guests, except Clare, arrived as invited at 'seven-thirty for eight', the men wearing black ties, also in accordance with the invitation, the women in full regalia, with bare backs and low décolleté, as though, Vivien thought, impatiently, it were a white-tie occasion. Clare did not arrive until just before eight, because it was her evening for visiting a deaf-blind old man who lived alone and she

had not felt able to neglect him merely in order to reach a dinner party in time for the preliminary drinks. She had already warned her hostess that she would be coming straight from a visit and would be late. Her one concession to dressing for the occasion was a gardenia on the lapel of the jacket of her black suit.

Vivien regarded her with admiration and envy. She looked so elegant and cool and poised, she thought—so that plump, pretty little Mrs. Berring, all floating golden gauze, off-the-shoulder and naked bosomed, looked vulgar beside her, and Mrs. Val Merrion, tall and grey-haired and dignified, dowdy in her sombre dark red brocade. Mrs. Hugh Ross, suburban in blue lace, with ropes of large artificial pearls and earrings to match, was of course the end; why, Vivien wondered, did plain women always make the worst of themselves? Maureen's short white ballet dress was charming, but she should have known better than to pin that ghastly bunch of nylon sweetpeas to the bodice. She herself was elegant in black velvet with a very handsome emerald necklace which James had given her to compensate her for Gavin's upsetting letter. 'You look beautiful—really beautiful!' he had told her, his red face glowing with possessive pride, and she entirely agreed with him, and wished that Gavin could see her—he would then surely be as proud of her as James was.

Yet still she envied Clare Williams that quality of distinction which was hers in a plain black suit furbished by nothing more than a small white flower.

Gavin was as excited and happy as he had been at his television interview. He was aware of the women's perfumes, of the texture of their dresses as they moved near him, particularly of the swirl of young Mrs. Berring's gauze, and the cat-like sleekness of his mother's black velvet. Maureen had described her dress to him before putting it on, had taken it off the hanger for him to feel the full ballet skirt and the layers of stiff frills beneath. He was reminded of the dresses of the *corps de ballet* of *Les Sylphides*, to which he had gone with his parents to see at Covent Garden during some school holidays the last time his father had been in England; it was the last outing he had with both parents.

He was pleased because Hugh Ross had come and because he

uninhibitedly tapped out sentences on the Arcaid for him, congratulating him on his last book of poems, asking him if he still liked Gerard Manley Hopkins, and if he ever saw the German girl who had visited him at the san. Mr. Merrion recorded that he was pleased to meet him at last and that he had hopes of an American edition of the new book, and Maurice told him on the machine what Mr. Merrion was like—'tall, grey, distinguished-looking, self-consciously the literary man, floppy black tie, old-fashioned tucked shirt. Stately missis in red brocade. Both sixtyish.'

Laurence told him on his hand about homely looking Mrs. Ross in blue lace, glamorous Mrs. Berring 'floating in gold gauze and naked from the nipples up. The Boss is fascinated.'

None of the women came to talk to him, feeling at a loss what to say and that it was all rather embarrassing. It was difficult, too, they felt, seeing him laughing and talking, his blue eyes so bright and clear, to realize that he could neither see nor hear; they found it uncanny; and disconcerting. They felt sorry for him, and also in a sense afraid of him, but Maureen talked to him on the machine, and then at last he felt Clare's cool strong fingers on his and his happiness was complete.

'You smell different!' he exclaimed. 'What is it? It's not violets—'

She lifted the lapel of her jacket for him to sniff the gardenia and he knew at once what it was. It was a wonderful party, she told him, 'the men all so distinguished looking, their ladies so glamorous!'

'Even old Laurie is all dressed up!' he shouted, happily.

Laurence, standing by the fireplace with Maurice, looked up with a small smile, then saw Clare and went forward to greet her, with something like relief.

Hayton was a good host and he worked hard all the way through dinner, with the stately Mrs. Merrion on his right and the glamorous Mrs. Berring on his left. He flirted a little, gallantly, with the one, and was gravely attentive to the conversation of the other. It was not easy for him; it required a real effort to concentrate on the conscientiously literary observations of the publisher's wife and put up at least a show of holding his own in the cultural

field when out of the tail of his eye he was distractingly aware of the delicious curves of young Mrs. Berring's sexily displayed bosom. When Mrs. Merrion asked him if he liked Camus for one wild moment he tossed up in his mind as to whether it was the name of a composer or a cheese before he produced the non-committal answer, 'I do, rather,' designed to meet either case. He was saved by Janice Berring, who decided that old Ma Merrion was showing off, and that poor old Sir James hadn't a clue, and she chipped in with the observation that *The Myth of Sisyphus* must be the world's most difficult title.

He turned to her gratefully and she leaned towards him, smiling, offering him an entrancing vista of the valley between her breasts.

'Just try saying it,' she urged.

Hayton, always ready to play any kind of game at the invitation of a pretty woman, tried it and muffed it and they both roared with laughter.

Mrs. Merrion turned away in distaste to inquire of Hugh Ross as to whether he had seen the 'exhibition of Kuniyoshi prints at the V. and A.' He replied warmly that he had indeed, my goodness yes; they exchanged a few notes and before she realized what was happening Mrs. Merrion found herself dragged out of her depths into a consideration of the plays of W. B. Yeats in relation to *Noh*. She made a few despairing efforts to appeal to her husband, but he was deeply involved with their hostess at the other end of the table in an earnest discussion of the relative merits of different makes of convector electric heaters, and when they finally came together, conversationally, it was only for her to confirm what he had 'just been telling Lady Hayton' about the make they used themselves.

Ross, having effectively undone Mrs. Merrion on the cultural plane, of malice prepense, disliking her pretentiousness, turned to the attractive red-haired girl on his right whom he had gathered was Gavin's Irish cousin who had flown in from Dublin specially for the occasion. He inquired of her what was on at the Abbey when she left. Maureen smiled and replied that she believed it was a play by Denis Johnston. She had been talking on hand to Gavin,

which she always found mentally fatiguing for any length of time, and it was a relief to relinquish him to Clare, and in the general conversational reshuffle Laurence, released from the boredom of have-you-read-have-you-seen chit-chat with Mrs. Ross, found himself thrown conversationally into the arms of Mrs. Berring, who repelled him to a quite pathological degree. She endeavoured to involve him in the conversation with Hayton.

'I was just saying to Sir James that Marilyn Monroe is to our generation what Marlene Dietrich was to his. Don't you agree?'

Laurence muttered that he wouldn't know, he hadn't been to the pictures for years, and didn't know one film star from another.

'For years?' the pretty face cried out of the cloud of golden gauze, then, with sudden realization, 'Oh, but of course you've been away in the backwoods of Ireland looking after Gavin, haven't you? I do think it's wonderful the way you talk to him—that sign language. I was watching you before dinner. And that lady—Mrs. Williams, isn't it? Look at her now? Such speed! It's really wonderful! I wish I could do it, but I couldn't *begin* to cope! I'd find it so terribly self-conscious-making.'

She gazed raptly at Gavin, who was laughing at something Clare's flying fingers were telling him.

'He's terribly good-looking, isn't he?' she added, and Laurence winced away from the pity in her voice.

Gavin sat immediately opposite, leaning back relaxed in his seat whilst Clare talked on his hand. He was a little drunk, as much with happiness as champagne.

Hugh Ross was engaged with Mrs. Merrion again and Laurence took the opportunity to address himself across the table to Maureen, rescuing her from a spell of inattention.

'It's odd to think of the McManus family sitting in their kitchen whilst all this is going on.'

She laughed. 'All kinds of different lives are going on at the same time all the while.'

'I know. But I suddenly thought of Derrygimlagh. The moon's full just now. It will be as light as day in the moonlight, and the little house so white. Can't you see it?'

'Yes, but look what's been brought in—the cake with twenty-one candles!'

She turned eagerly to Gavin, but Clare had already told him and he was leaning forward reaching out his right hand guided by her to take the silver-handled knife and cut the cake.

'Don't I have to blow out all the candles and wish?' he cried.

Clare told him, 'Yes, but it looks so pretty—let it stay alight for a few minutes——'

'What shall I wish?'

'That must be your secret.'

'I've only one wish.'

Vivien looked distressed.

'It's too awful,' she murmured to Maurice Berring. 'How can he have any but one wish, and not a chance of it ever being realized.'

'Medical science is progressing all the time,' Maurice comforted her.

'I believe they never give up hope,' Mr. Merriion murmured, compassionately.

'Now shall I blow?' Gavin was demanding. Then he laughed. 'I suppose everyone's thinking I'm going to wish I could see and hear again. But that isn't my wish. Here goes!'

He took a breath and blew out the twenty-one candles, then leaned back in his chair laughing.

'Did I do it?'

Clare pressed his hand in assent. He laughed again, drunkenly, excitedly. 'Laurie,' he cried, 'I did it! My wish! It might even come true. Wishes do come true if you wish them hard enough!'

Laurence caught Clare's eye.

'Tell him whatever it is I wish it along with him.'

Clare said this on Gavin's hand. He laughed and said, 'Thanks, Laurie. If it ever does come true I'll remind you of that!'

Later when everyone was dancing to the record-player Maureen sat on a settee with Laurence who insisted that he couldn't dance; she asked him, 'What do you suppose Gavin wished?'

'I've no idea. Perhaps that you might fall in love with him!'

'You'd share that wish?'

'Yes. He needs someone.'

She sighed. 'No one can fall in love to order. I'm in love with you.' The champagne made it easy to say it; in the morning she would remember and be ashamed, he knew.

He said, roughly, 'Don't be a little fool! When this dance finishes you should go and dance with Gavin. It's his party and a very special occasion for him. He'll be very hurt if you don't.'

She answered, a little petulantly, 'Of course I'll dance with him—I always intended to, but first Mrs. Williams was holding on to him as though she'd got him on lease, and for the last half hour he's been sleep-walking to music with Mrs. Berring.'

'Go and take him away from her.'

He got up, adding, 'I must go and talk to your aunt, anyhow.'

Gavin did in fact feel that he was moving in a dream. At first he had felt unsure of himself trying to follow Clare's rhythm; then it had impressed itself on him and he had gained confidence.

During a pause he had said, 'Don't leave me—I couldn't do it with anyone else!'

She had told him, 'You could, quite easily. Here is your friend Maurice's lovely wife. She's a good dancer. Just let her lead.'

Then another hand was put into his and another arm went round him.

'I feel terribly nervous,' Janice Berring said.

'There's no need,' Clare assured her. 'If you want to answer yes to anything he says just press his hand. Lead firmly. He'll follow all right.'

Gavin felt himself drawn close to a female body of incredible softness. His arm tightened round her; he bent his head and his cheek brushed hers and she did not avert her face. He had a sensation of drowning in golden gauze and the golden fumes of champagne. There was nothing and nobody but this wonderful creature in his arms, and because he couldn't see her or hear the music to which they moved together like one body, it all had the quality of a dream. A beautiful endless dream. It seemed to go on and on, and he wanted it to go on for ever, never to wake from the dream. But it did end and he did wake; the softness and warmth

in his arms gently withdrew from him, with a final pressure of his hand, then other hands took his and instantly he knew it was Maureen and happiness was restored to him. He hugged her to him, eagerly, hungrily.

'It's strange dancing in the dark to music you can't hear,' he told her. 'At first I felt giddy and off-balance. Now I feel as though I could go on for ever!'

The dance finished and Maureen kept Gavin's hand in hers, then he felt Laurence take his other hand to tell him on it, 'The party is breaking up. Here are the Berrings to say goodbye.'

Gavin felt Janice take his hand and was aware, once again, of her perfume.

'It was lovely dancing with you,' he cried. 'I'd like to do it till we both dropped dead!'

She laughed to cover the embarrassment she felt at her inability to communicate with him. She appealed to Laurence.

'Tell him I hope we dance together again sometime.'

Laurence told him and then Maurice had seized Gavin's hand. One after another they came and shook hands and Laurence told Gavin who they were and what they said, until it came to Clare. He knew her at once, even before her fingers spoke to him.

She asked him how long he would be in London and promised to come and see him again before he left. It was a lovely party, she added, and she hoped he got his wish.

He laughed. 'If you knew what it was you might not!'

She pressed his fingers and he sensed her smile.

'I'll just wish you happiness, then.'

She put her gardenia into his hand and lightly kissed his cheek, and with something of the old desolation he was aware of her going.

'I wish they wouldn't all go,' he complained. 'Where's Maureen?'

She was standing close by and touched him to indicate her presence; then Vivien came up, having seen the last guest off.

'It was a very good party,' Laurence told her.

'It was wonderful—everyone thought so,' Maureen confirmed. Vivien smiled, tiredly.

'I'm glad. Especially if Gavin thought so.'

Laurence touched Gavin.

'Your mother is here. She hopes you liked the party.'

'Oh, yes!' Gavin cried. 'It was lovely! Thank you for everything!'

He reached out a hand and it came to rest on her shoulder. He stroked the velvet, smiling.

'You feel like a lovely cat,' he said, then, to her astonishment, bent forward and kissed her.

'Thank-you-for-a-lovely-party,' he said, gabbling it like a small boy, sincerely wanting to thank her but embarrassed by the expression of gratitude and of affection.

It was the measure of their relationship that Vivien was also embarrassed; though she was also touched.

'Well,' she said, 'wonders will never cease!' She hesitated, looking from one to the other of them, confusedly, at a loss. 'Well, good night,' she said, and to Laurence, 'Say good night to Gavin for me,' then, with a sudden nervous twitch of her lips, 'My grown-up son!'

She turned to go and Laurence crossed the room and opened the door for her.

'He's very happy tonight,' he told her.

She smiled, but he knew that she was near to tears.

'At least I can throw a successful party for him!'

'You do more for him than you realize—just by bearing with him.'

She shook her head, her eyes brimming.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

He followed her a step outside to say quickly, 'Tell the staff I'll be going out for a short while when Gavin's asleep—tell them not to lock me out. I need air.'

'I'll tell them not to lock the front door.'

He turned back into the room. Maureen and Gavin sat at a small table with the Arcaid between them. Gavin was exclaiming, 'Good idea! Let's go early—before breakfast!'

'What are you planning to do before breakfast?' Laurence asked.

'Ride in the Row—if we can get horses!'

'Extraordinary things you horsey people do! What time do you want Gavin up?'

'I don't know till I've telephoned in the morning. I'll have to come and knock on the door.'

'You'd better get to bed now and get some sleep.'

'I'm not tired!'

'All the same the party's over.'

He went over to Gavin, spelling out the single word 'Bed' on his hand.

'It's such an anticlimax to go to bed,' Gavin protested.

Laurence told him, 'It's late. You're getting up early. Please come.'

To Maureen he said, 'I'm too tired to cope with much more manual conversation.'

Gavin got up, reluctantly.

'You're a bully, Laurie.'

Laurence merely laid a hand on his arm to guide him across the room. Gavin jerked away. 'I don't need you!' he declared.

Maureen grabbed him in time to prevent him walking into a chair. He spun round whirling her into his arms.

'Let's dance out of the room!'

Laughing she led him in a polka across the wide open space of the polished floor to the door.

Laurence followed, switching lights off as he went.

In their room Gavin's mood changed, excitement collapsing into despair.

'The tide has gone out,' he declared. 'So far out I don't think it'll ever come in again!'

Laurence pressed his hand in sympathy and handed him a tumbler in which he had dissolved some sleeping tablets.

Gavin said, 'You'd better give me something else—this won't keep me under more than a few hours. I can't face lying awake thinking of Janice all night. It was all wonderful while it lasted, but it comes to an end, and then everything seems so futile and empty. There's no point to my existence, is there? I can never arouse anything in anyone except pity. There is one person who

doesn't just feel sorry for me, but I'm not allowed even to live in the same country—I'm made to go into hiding from her——'

Laurence was aware of the old latent hysteria rising in the tirade. He put his arm round Gavin's shoulder. Gavin drained the glass then turned his face into Laurence.

'I get so fed-up—so despairing——'

Laurence said on his hand, 'One day your wish will come true.'

'Then you'll hate me!'

'That could never happen. Get to bed and I'll bring you the phenobarbitone.'

When Gavin was in bed he sat by him holding his hand until the drugs worked and he slept deeply.

Then Laurence changed out of the hired dress suit, and went down the stairs and across the wide hall and let himself out into the waiting moonlight. Now at last he could shake off the feeling of claustrophobia induced by too many people too close to him for too long. His thoughts went back to Derrygimlagh. It would be as light as day there in the moonlight, and the silence absolute. He longed to be back there, alone with Gavin. Here the moonlight laved pavements and houses and was filled with the distant rumble of traffic and the scream of jet planes coming in low to land or rising to take off to the ends of the world.

He crossed the road and walked in the darkness of trees, beyond the reach of the moonlight. The road curved into a deeper darkness, away from houses, crossing the park. He walked unheeding of direction, grateful for the night air after the heat of the house, glad to be alone free of the obligation to talk, orally or manually. He passed a man and woman leaning up against railings locked in an embrace of tumescent intensity and unaware of his passing. He envied them that intensity and its obliviousness. Whether it was love or simple lust, or the one wedded to the other, what did it signify? To be capable of being so lost in another person, and to be free to indulge that capacity—that was most wonderful, most devoutly to be desired. But to have that capacity and not to be free . . . It was like an ulcer, he thought wily, if you shrank from surgery, cutting out what you could not cure, you learned to live with it; you had no choice. It became a condition of living.

He walked a long time and the moon went down, taking all enchantment with it. He had walked in a circle and found himself near his starting point. The rumble of traffic was close at hand again and the sky red with reflected neon lights. He turned away from the park and came into a main road. The traffic was dense; buses were still running and there were a number of heavy lorries. There were night places, white with strip lighting, which catered for the long-distance lorry drivers, and for the people who believed that if you sat late enough into the night in that insomniac white light something must eventually happen. People who inhabited squalid bed-sitting-rooms off the Edgware Road and had no desire to return to them—at least not alone. People with no jobs to go to in the morning. People who waited in brightly lit hells of blaring juke-boxes and evil faces and bottomless abysses of boredom; waiting to pick a quarrel, or a pocket, or merely waiting for a pick-up, of either sex.

He entered the first of these places he came to. They were familiar territory. He went to the bar and was served with coffee and carried it away, looking for a table. A girl with chopped-about yellow hair and heavily made-up eyes, and a full bust hoisted high under a tight white sweater, smiled at him from a table at which she sat alone. It was a very small smile, devoid of friendliness, barely an invitation, even; but it was a smile he recognized whenever and wherever he encountered it. He carried his coffee to the table and asked the routine question, 'Mind if I sit here?'

'Not at all.' Ever so slightly she moved in a token gesture of making room.

She accepted a cigarette from him and he regarded her closely whilst he held the match for her. She was aware that he did so and took her time, sure of herself; of him. She was about twenty-five, he thought, in spite of the teenage get-up; been a good few years on the game. She did her own sizing-up; had her own recognizings. They asked each other no questions. Fifteen minutes after he had seated himself at the table they left together.

When Maureen knocked on the door in the morning to tell Gavin what time they were going riding there was no answer. She

knocked again, more loudly, waited, then cautiously opened the door a crack. Gavin was sleeping on his side, an arm curved round his pillow. The other bed had not been slept in.

She returned to her room, uncertain what to do. It was seven o'clock; she had fixed the ride for eight-thirty; there was still time; she could wait half an hour. She lay down on her bed, dozing lightly; she did not want to think where Laurence might have been all night; she wanted to go back to the room in half an hour and find him in his bed and deceive herself that he had been there all the time.

It didn't work out quite like that for she was wakened by her door opening. She started up and saw Laurence standing there in his dressing-gown.

'Is this ride on?' he inquired. 'You didn't come and knock and we wondered if you'd overslept. It's nearly eight o'clock.'

'I fixed it for eight-thirty,' she told him, 'but I can telephone and make it nine. We could be there by then if we hurry.'

'It's a nice morning,' he told her. 'I've been for a swim in the Serpentine.'

She noticed then that his hair was wet.

'Did you really? I call that brave! Wasn't it cold?'

'It was, rather. But remarkably cleansing. Quite a purification, in fact!' He smiled, then added, 'I'll go and get Gavin up.'

5

LAURENCE told the girl from the café: 'Having paid you for the whole night I intend to spend the rest of it talking. This will be extremely boring for you, probably, but then yours is a very boring profession.'

'That's what you think! I sometimes have a lot of fun. Once in a way.'

'I'm glad to hear it. But you must regard it as an occupational hazard that also once in a way you have to bear with someone you can only regard as nuts.'

'You're telling me! Religious maniacs and all, some of them. They're the worst.'

'I'm not any kind of a maniac. I am merely someone with no one to talk to. That's not new to you, of course. Your world abounds with the lonely, married and unmarried. Men whose wives don't understand them, and men whose wives understand them all too well. And those who have no one——'

'Excuse me a moment, dear.'

The girl heaved her naked body out of the bed and reached for a gaudily floral dressing-gown lying crumpled at the foot of it.

'If this is going to be an all-night session just talking how about we make some tea?'

'Very good idea. Allow me!'

He helped her on with the dressing-gown and followed her to the corner of the room where behind a dingy red curtain suspended from a wire was a wash-basin and a collection of kitchen things. She filled the kettle and he took it from her, lit the gas-ring at the side of the gas-fire, and put the kettle on to boil. She came

from behind the curtain carrying a tray with a teapot, cups and saucers, milk and sugar, a fancy tin containing biscuits.

'Care for a drink whilst we wait for the kettle?'

'What have you got?'

'There's some gin.'

'No, thanks. You have it. You'll need it as the long night wears on.'

She put down the tray and stood looking at him.

'What is it you want to natter about? Are you on the run, or something?'

'No, dear. Nothing like that. I served all they dished out to me which was a lot.'

'What were you in for?'

'Housebreaking. Habitual. In the end they get fed up with you and you get a stretch of p.d. Preventive detention. Parkhurst. Not a bad prison as prisons go. On the last lap I went out with working-parties working in the fields.'

'Got quite to like it, like?' Her voice was ironic. She bent down and poured hot water into the teapot, rinsed the pot, and made tea. He waited until the operation was complete and she had poured the tea and set some biscuits out on a plate and settled into an armchair facing him. Then he continued:

'I never got to like it, no. It was a seven-year stretch and there's no remission with p.d. and the time dragged. Working outside unsettled me. I'd want to be free to go striding away over the fields, not working there in a line with other men with a screw looking on and the prison staring back across the road.'

'Did you have visitors?'

'No. Only the official ones. I had no friends. Various people were helpful, getting me jobs when I came out, taking a lot of trouble, but I always let them down—don't ask me why. I've been asked it so many times, and I don't know the answer. I had no particular desire to go straight, you see. No moral conviction. I would have liked to have lived the way I did and got away with it. I never liked any of the jobs that were found for me with so much trouble. Sooner or later I'd get bored and turn it in. Or have a row with the person over me and be fired. I'd never try for another

job. The jobs I'd do on my own would be adventurous, exciting. I discovered that with my first job, when I was thirteen and stole a bicycle. At the juvenile court they decided my home background was responsible—illegitimate, mother a slut, children by different fathers and all of us running the streets. Slum streets at that. I was put to an approved school. Love God, honour the King. It didn't take. I graduated to Borstal. Then prison.

'Various well-meaning social workers down through the years had a go at trying to reform me. It didn't take. Don't you want to be a decent self-respecting member of society? they would ask me. I'd feel quite sorry for them sometimes, they'd be so sad about me, and so disappointed in their lack of results. No, I'd say, not particularly. What I'd like, I'd tell them—I'd mean it, too, I never said it to shock—what I'd like would be to be a decent self-respecting successful burglar doing a good job and keeping out of prison. Some of them would get annoyed then and wash their hands of me saying if I wanted to be among the riff-raff of society, leading an anti-social life and spending most of my time in prison there was no more to say. It was up to me. I quite agreed. All I wanted was that they should leave me alone. There was a parson very keen to do what he called inculcate a sense of moral responsibility into me. I don't go for parsons as a general rule but this one I liked. He was sincere—lived a humble sort of life and really believed what he preached. Tried to live it himself. He worked hard with me, but we started from different premises: he believed in God and I didn't. That was another thing that didn't take with me—religion.

'I did a lot of thinking inside. I had the time. Quite a bit of reading, too. I knew before I started making a habit of going to prison that I liked books. I discovered it at the approved school. It was the only good thing that came out of it. I liked reading about people who were at war with society—who made their own laws, lived their lives their own way—who didn't conform . . .'

The girl stifled a yawn and refilled the teapot.

'More tea?'

He passed his cup and she refilled it.

'It's weak,' she observed. 'I think I'll top mine up with a tot of gin. If you'll excuse me——'

She fetched a small bottle of gin from a cupboard. There was very little left and she poured it into her cup.

'You mean people like Robin Hood?'

'Well, yes, if you like. I was thinking more of people like Victor Hugo and Gauguin and Shelley and Blake, and tormented self-torturing people like Corvo—people you wouldn't know about perhaps—'

'Not reely,' the girl said. She resettled herself in the armchair and lit a cigarette.

'Any kind of revolutionary interested me—moral, social, political. I didn't aspire to be one. I didn't care enough about society to want to reform it. My philosophy was purely negative. Nihilist. Today it would be called existentialist. Nihilism, divorced from its political context, was the precursor of existentialism, as I see it.'

He paused to light another cigarette and saw that the girl's head had fallen forward on her chest; the cessation of his voice roused her from her doze and she jerked up, smiling.

'I wasn't asleep,' she said. 'Just closed my eyes against the light.'

'We don't need the light to talk by.' He reached out a hand and switched off the red-shaded table-lamp, and the room was immediately less squalid. 'The fire gives enough light,' he added.

'You were saying——' the girl said, making an effort. She put her feet up on the rumpled bed. The skirt of her dressing-gown fell away exposing her naked legs and thighs; she immediately drew it over. A job was one thing; a conversation another. She reckoned to know how to behave.

'I was saying that inside I had time to think. I thought about my mother. She was outside of society, living life in her own way, not giving a damn for anyone or anything, as lascivious as a cart-load of monkeys and with as little shame. I wanted to be able at least to feel tolerant about her. But it was no good. Perhaps if she had shown me any affection I might have been able to. I don't know. I couldn't remember any expression of affection from her, of her ever kissing me, or giving me a toy. Only of being told to shut up and to clear out. And as far back as I could remember, when I was about three years old, of her with a man in her bed,

across the room from me, different men. Right up to the time I went to school. She would come back late at night with some man and go to bed with him in the room. Perhaps she thought I was asleep. Perhaps she didn't care, even when I was old enough to understand. In the end the landlady complained and we had to clear out. In the next place I had a room to myself, but I knew all the facts of life by then. I hated my mother so much I hated her even to come near me. When I stole the bicycle I intended to ride far away on it. I had no idea where, but far, far away. I was glad when I was sent to the approved school. I had a clean bed to sleep in, regular meals instead of the everlasting fish-and-chips I was always being sent for, and buttons on my clothes. I hated the discipline and all the love-God-honour-the-King stuff, but all the same it was better than home. And I discovered books.

'I was sixteen when I left the school and growing up fast. I was put to live in a hostel full of boys like me and was found a job in a garage. Another boy initiated me into charging for a gallon more than I put in and pocketing the difference, and I taught myself to give wrong change. It went on for quite a time. I was considered a nice quiet well-spoken boy. I graduated to Borstal with honours, you might say. Two years there and it was 1940, and I was twenty and the Army grabbed me. I had my twenty-first birthday in Tobruk. It was quite a party. But that's another story. I had a squalid war.'

The girl's head had fallen forward on to her chest again and she was snoring, lightly. He got up and went over to her. She started up, then laughed apologetically.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I just dozed off.'

'Come on,' he said. 'Lie on the bed. You'll be more comfortable.'

He pulled her to her feet.

'I wouldn't mind a lay-down,' she admitted.

He smoothed the grimy sheets and straightened the pillow and she flung herself down.

'Wouldn't you like to lay down with me for a bit?' she suggested, then added, 'I don't mean for fun-an'-games, unless you want to. But I don't mind, if you feel like it. You might doze off then.'

He drew a grubby pink eiderdown over her.

'You're kind, but what I need is not sex but to talk.'

'I can't seem to keep awake. You'll have to excuse me, but it's always the same, when a voice goes on and on—'

'That's all right. At least you're there, a live human being in the same room with me. At least I don't get the feeling of talking to myself, even if you're not listening—even if you're asleep. There's not really a lot more to tell. I was in and out of prison continuously after the war and finally got seven years p.d.'

'V.d.,' the girl murmured, making an effort to concentrate. 'I've never had it. Only the clap a couple of times.'

'You're lucky. But I said p.d. Preventive detention. It didn't inculcate in me the moral sense my parson friend hoped for and no doubt prayed for, but it did inculcate in me the determination to keep out in future. I had had enough. I could get ten or fourteen years next time, and I felt I'd die rather. I still feel that. When I came out my parson friend got me a job in a general hospital, as orderly. He'd asked me near the time of my release if there was anything I felt I might be interested to do and I opted for hospital work. I'd worked in the hospital at Parkhurst for a bit and looking after outsiders like myself appealed to me. I knew that in a hospital outside the patients would be ordinary decent law-abiding citizens, but there'd be all sorts, I told myself, and some of them poor and humble and probably worthless. That's something. My parson friend when I told him I wasn't worth his bothering with, that I was worthless, and not even repentant about it, said that was the very reason he had to hold on to me—there are always people ready to look after the worthwhile people, he said; it's the worthless ones, the undeserving, that need help.

'So after a lot of trying he got me the hospital job. The hospital secretary knew my record, but the people I worked with didn't. I did my job and they accepted me. It was all right. I neither liked it nor disliked it. I just went along. Then one day an old man knocked down in the street was brought in and I saw a lady sitting by his bed and talking to him on his hand in what I thought was the deaf-and-dumb language, but I discovered the old man was deaf and blind. The lady was one of those devoted people who go

about visiting the deaf-blind. I refer to her as a lady because there was—is—something special about her. There is a lady sweet and kind. Between them this lady and the poor deaf-blind old man changed my life. They provided me with a reason for living. They presented me with a brand new idea. The idea of service.'

He paused and listened to the girl's light snoring.

'Perhaps it's as well you're asleep, little Miss Nameless, for I'm not sure I could continue from this point if you were awake.

'The idea of any human being living sealed off from other human beings in total darkness and total silence had never occurred to me. I'd seen some pretty horrible things in hospital, things I hadn't realized could happen to the human body, but this thing was new to me. In a vague sort of way, of course, I knew about Helen Keller, but I'd thought of her as something exceptional, and I'd been aware of blind people about. It had just never occurred to me there could be people both blind and deaf, except in rare cases. But here was an old man who had been like it since he was sixteen, as a result of an illness, and I learned that there were many such people, and a whole new world presented itself to me.

'Clare, the lady, became my friend. She never asked questions and I never told her anything about myself. I didn't want her to know. For the first time in my life I wanted not to be an outsider. Once when I thought she had some idea about me I panicked, though even if she did know it would make no difference to our friendship. She knows I tend to drink too much, but she never criticizes—not even implicitly. She's the only person other than you, my little Sleeping Beauty, I've ever talked to, but I've given her intimations only—not the life-story you're being treated to. She taught me Braille, and the manual alphabet, so that I could talk to deaf-blind people on their hands, and I began visiting people, helping her out. Finally she had me visit a deaf-blind boy, the stepson of a wealthy business man. We took to each other, and I ended up by giving up the hospital work to look after him exclusively. Now we live together.'

He got up and went over to the girl, stood looking down at her, laid a hand on her shoulder. She stirred in her sleep and rolled over, groaning slightly, settling down more deeply.

He went back to his armchair beside the gas-fire, lit another cigarette, and continued:

'We've reached the part you wouldn't understand, my lovely, for I more than love this boy; I am in love with him. This is something remarkable because I've never loved any human being in my life before, or even had the illusion of doing so. I've known for a long time that I loved, but not until tonight that I was in love. But now I know. I am in love. And more than that. And for this love I'd die, if need be.

'That's all. If I can't thank you for listening at least thank you for being there.'

He went over to the window. The sky was lightening above the roofs of drab houses, their unwashed windows closed against the morning air. How many slept alone behind those dirty curtains, or sharing a bed were still alone? How many lusts had been consummated there that night, how many hungers of flesh and spirit gone unassuaged? How many were already stirring in their sleep to wake and face, without hope or pleasure, one more day?

He turned back to the room and turned off the gas-fire, then let himself out on to the dark narrow landing. Striking matches he found his way down the stairs and to the front door and let himself out into the street.

It was quite light by the time he reached the Serpentine, and the sky held the promise of a bright morning. He had an intense desire for the baptism that ice-cold water offered.

BACK in Derrygimlagh the wind of change had been blowing in their absence.

They had barely settled themselves in the car which met them at the bus from Galway before the driver observed to Laurence, 'Ye'll be having great company out your way soon! They say Eddy Mangan got a good price for the old Castle.'

'Has someone bought the Castle? That old heap of stones!'

'Heaps of stones is right, but sold it is right enough.'

'Who on earth would buy a ruin like that?'

' 'Tis a Mr. Riddling, they say, from England, and after buildin' the place up the way it'll open in the spring as a toorist hotel, with fishin' rights in the lake and piped water in every bedroom! It'll be great to see the lights shinin' through the windows again like when I was a young lad.'

Laurence took Gavin's hand to tell him the news.

'It won't make any difference to us,' Gavin said. 'It'll only mean more cars on the road in summer.'

And the deaf-blind boy-poet as one of the local sights, Laurence thought, wilyly, but he said nothing.

The old house was not the complete ruin Laurence proclaimed it. The dry-stone walls round the demesne had collapsed in places and the stones from them lay scattered about. The glass in all the windows had been smashed and in some of the rooms the floors were broken, and part of the roof had caved in, but the walls of the house stood firm under their matting of ivy, and there was nothing wrong with the place that a sufficiency of money couldn't put right.

As the weeks and months passed it became evident that Mr. Riddling had that sufficiency. The story went round that he was

'worth millions and millions'. But other stories circulated that sure he hadn't a penny of his own, 'twas all his wife's. A Third Front sprang up to declare, knowledgeably, that he was merely acting for a big firm in England, a corporation, like the Irish Tourist Board, or the Turf Board, *Bord na Mona*, maybe.

Mr. Riddling himself was a quare one, wherever his money came from, with his enormous moustaches and his side-whiskers and his hair crawling down the back of his neck, and his huge thick hand-knitted sweaters and bright-coloured handwoven local tweeds that no decent Irishman would be seen dead in. Not but what he wasn't a very pleasant gentleman, paying promptly and well for all work done for him, and, Protestant though he was, giving the work out to a Catholic contractor, though everyone knew that Stevie White had been along to him offering to do the work for ten per cent less than any other tender put in for it and to make a 'good Protestant job of it', that being his slogan.

But Basil Riddling reckoned that he had better keep in with the Catholic majority, since he intended to live among them, and having for a time run a guest-house in another part of the country he knew that whether people went to Mass or Matins on Sunday mornings where jobs were concerned there was nothing to choose; there were only Irish jobs. He took a pent-house suite in the luxury hotel in Galway for himself and his wife and drove out every day—or almost every day—to see how the work was progressing. It required an act of faith to believe that the Castle Hotel would really open next Easter.

Before returning to England for Christmas he called on his fellow countrymen at the cottage. Mr. Mangan had told him of his English neighbours and who they were, and Mr. Riddling was delighted. It was going to be a splendid asset when he got the hotel going to be able to say casually to his guests that they had the deaf-blind boy-poet, Gavin Edwards—'you probably saw him on TV a while back'—living a stone's throw away. 'His mother married Sir James Hayton, you know,' he would throw in for further cachet. It would be something for the guests to do after dinner, to take a stroll up the road and see where the young man lived. Some of them might even manage to meet him—if you could be said to

meet a person who was both deaf and blind; Mr. Riddling didn't know; he had never encountered such a person. His call at the cottage was made in the spirit of research rather than neighbourliness.

It was a mild sunny morning and Gavin was sitting on the balcony reading a Braille magazine and Laurence was in the kitchen preparing a meal, Minnaloushe wreathing hopefully round his legs. He opened the door at the sound of steps coming briskly up the path and was confronted by a tall thickset man with air-force moustaches, a massive white polo-necked sweater, and tweed trousers, brightly flecked with blue, red, and yellow, tucked into wellingtons.

This massive and spectacular person smiled amiably and in booming voice announced himself as 'Basil Riddling, the king of the Castle!' He strode up the path and thrust out his hand. 'How d'ye do? I thought as the Americans say we should get acquainted.'

Laurence hurriedly wiped his hands on his striped apron and they shook hands.

'My name's Laurence Oakes,' he said. 'But you probably know.'

'Oh, indeed,' the king of the Castle boomed. 'The local grapevine works very effectively.' He looked about him. 'Wonderful spot here, for a writer. Your young man must appreciate it.'

Laurence said, drily, 'It would be as peaceful for him on London airport.'

'Oh, yes, indeed. Of course one forgets. I hadn't realized he was *totally* deaf.'

'Totally.'

Laurence regarded the newcomer, and added, 'I take it you know who he is?'

'Oh, yes, rather. I was most interested. Most. I regard his presence here as a *great* asset.'

'Like the lake and the fishing rights and the view?'

Riddling smiled, amiably, expansively.

'Of rather more human interest, shall we say?' He touched the escalonia by the porch. 'Wonderful how this shrub flourishes here! I must get some growing down at the Castle.'

'Look,' Laurence said, firmly, 'if you had a son who was doubly

afflicted in this way would you want him stared at by strangers as a local curiosity, like a freak in a circus?’

Riddling stopped paddling about with short steps and little jerky movements examining shrubs and stood still, looking at the other man’s dark angry face in mild astonishment.

‘My dear fellow, you misunderstand. The class of people who will be coming to my hotel, paying three guineas a day, will surely know how to conduct themselves!’

‘Since when was being monied a guarantee of sensibility?’

‘Really, my dear fellow, aren’t you striking too high a note? A celebrity in the locality is naturally of interest. There will be no intrusion on your privacy. Naturally this charming cottage where the young poet lives in his Connemara seclusion is of interest. People will like to take a peep at it, and if they also get a glimpse of the young man, well, as they say here, what harm? After all, the blind can’t see!’

He grinned, pleased with his witticism.

‘There’s such a thing as respecting a person’s disability.’

‘My dear fellow, you’re worrying unnecessarily. I’m very glad I called up here today, if only to set your mind at rest. I should like to bring my wife up here sometime, if I may. She would be charmed. Might I have the pleasure of meeting the young poet? I noticed him sitting on the balcony as I came up.’

Laurence led the way into the house, Riddling exclaiming as they went—‘Adorable cat! Delightful taste! Charming room!’—then fell silent before the lifted face and brilliant sightless eyes of the young man seated on the balcony.

Laurence took Gavin’s hand and told him, ‘We have a visitor. The king of the Castle. Just shake hands and say hullo.’

Gavin rose and held out his hand.

‘Hullo,’ he said.

Riddling took the hand and answered, startled, ‘Oh, hullo,’ then turned to Laurence, embarrassed. ‘How do I communicate with him?’

Laurence indicated the Arcaid on the table.

‘You can use that. Just type what you want to say. It comes up in Braille.’

He took Gavin's hand and placed it on the tape.

Riddling, who could type, tapped out quickly, 'Honoured to meet you. Much enjoyed the TV reading of your poems. I must have some of your books on sale in my hotel. I specially liked that poem in the second collection, *Sleeping my blood is kindled*—how does it go on?'

Gavin laughed, happily.

'*Waking my mind remembers, But my heart feels nothing.*'

'When I get the hotel going you must come and give us a reading.'

Gavin laughed, but made no reply. Riddling got up.

'Charming. Absolutely charming!'

He took Gavin's hand and shook it.

'Oh, goodbye,' Gavin said. 'Thanks for coming.'

Laurence walked to the door with the visitor.

'I am delighted to have met you both. Delighted. You must allow me to bring my wife when we are back after Christmas. Perhaps you would both dine with us when we get the hotel going—before the season begins?'

'It's kind of you,' Laurence said, 'but we are hermits. We like it that way. Just leave us in peace. It's all we ask.'

'Your wishes must of course be respected. I realize the difficulties——'

'If you would keep Gavin's identity a secret from your guests—otherwise it's the end of our peace here.'

'You have my assurance, my dear fellow. Set your mind at rest . . .' With a wave of his hand he cried, 'Fare thee well,' and strode jauntily down the path.

LAURENCE'S mind was not set at rest, and he watched the work on the old house, its gradual re-emergence as a restored and modernized place, with growing anxiety. In Devonshire Gavin had been glad for him to discourage visitors; now he welcomed them. He had been delighted when Riddling had quoted a line from one of his poems and he refused to accept Laurence's assertion that he was an 'old monster'.

'You're just jealous of my knowing anyone else!' he declared. 'What are you afraid of—that one of them will run off with me?'

'I'm afraid of Riddling exploiting you,' Laurence told him. 'Including you as one of the local sights and people coming here out of curiosity.'

'They might come because they're interested and like my poetry. It's you who try to make me out as a kind of freak!'

'It must be as you wish,' Laurence told him.

Gavin persisted, 'What have you got against Mr. Riddling, anyhow?'

'He's a show-off. All that boisterous bonhomie. I feel he sees himself as a personality with a capital P.'

'Well, anyhow, he likes my poetry and he's friendly and you needn't stay around when he comes up. You forget what it's like to be just sitting here in the dark—'

Laurence pressed his hand and offered no comment.

He wrote to Clare, 'The new hotel is almost finished. The world is closing in on our seclusion and peace. I am afraid. I hardly know why. Soon it will be spring. I saw the first snowdrops today. I dread the summer coming . . .'

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They spent Christmas at the Villa Napoli and when they got back to Derrygimlagh the Riddlings had returned from England and were staying now in the town and coming out every day to the Castle, to be, as Riddling put it, 'on the job'. He came frequently to see Gavin and learned to talk to him manually, working up a fair speed in a remarkably short time. He had a massive, spectacular good-nature, was unself-conscious, and quite impervious to Laurence's undisguised dislike and mistrust. He would come whistling and singing loudly up the path, wave to Laurence if he saw him working outside, call out facetiously, 'God speed the work!' or 'Top of the mornin' to yez,' and march on into the house. Gavin quickly came to recognize his touch of greeting and always looked up from what he was doing with an eager smile. Riddling usually had some quotation from one of Gavin's poems ready, and when a poem had appeared the previous Sunday would always congratulate him on it and quote from it. Laurence would come into the house and see them sitting together, in the living-room or on the balcony, Gavin with his elbows on the table, his left hand raised and extended to Riddling, and the man leaning forward eagerly, smiling, his red whiskery face positively glowing with benevolence, Laurence would think, disgustedly, with an irrational contempt.

He wrote to Clare: 'I don't know why I dislike Riddling so much. It doesn't explain it to say that he's not my kind of a person, for who—what—is my kind of a person? Gavin's grandparents are much more not my kind of people—Riddling is at least intelligent—yet though they bore me I don't feel this fierce antipathy. I dislike his heartiness and extroversion, but one doesn't, in rational terms, hate a man's guts because he sings and whistles and is noisy and uninhibited, and I do hate Basil Riddling's guts. When he comes roaring up the path and barging into the house with his idiotic bogus Irish greetings and cries Fare-thee-well when he goes, I feel as though I could bat him on the head—I who had to bury a hare, being unable to paunch it! I who had a cat spayed because I've no heart for drowning kittens! I who feel miserable at the sight of a starving cat or a deprived snotty-nosed child!

'Intellectually I am deeply opposed to violence—I who once

bashed a man in the face for calling me a bastard, which I anyhow am. I am opposed to the violence of wars, assassinations, executions, floggings. The violence of mob rule, and lynchings, and abbatoirs.

'But emotionally there is such violence in me that at times I could suffocate with the repression of it! Years ago when I came across that thing, "I should like to see the last king strangled by the guts of the last priest", I was shocked by the savagery of it, though I've no more use for royalty and the church than Messelier had.

'What to make of it? Nothing except the complexity of human nature. And that is nothing new . . .'

Edna Riddling called once, to please her husband. She was a small, busy, bustling woman, of an abundant and aggressive commonsense, and a great deal more interested in the kitchen arrangements at the cottage than in the young poet—with whom in any case she felt unable to cope. That was Basil's department; he loved personalities, especially rather odd ones; her function was to minister to material needs—which included Basil's sexual appetite, the vigour of which was his pride and joy, and a cross she bore with the fortitude she brought to bear on all the difficulties with which life was beset. Many a next day's shopping list she had planned during the nightly expositions of her husband's virility. 'My poor dear wife,' he would say, fondly, at the termination of his exertions, 'it's too bad!' With this she innerly agreed, but was much too loyal, much too devoted, to say so; it was a part of marriage, like the weekly laundry list, the menu-planning, the sock-darning; a chore, like any other.

Riddling greatly admired his wife. He told Gavin about her. 'Edna's a great little woman,' he told him. 'The real burden of this hotel enterprise rests on her capable shoulders.'

Gavin was not interested in the great little woman, but he was interested in the hotel, and the possibility of meeting people through it, of increasing his contact with the outside world.

The winter seemed long, with the wind and rain imposing confinement to the house. It was all right for Laurence, Gavin

would think; he had plenty to do, and even in the bad weather he would cycle into the town for their provisions, have some contact with the outside world. Except for Basil Riddling, about whom Laurence used such words as bogus and charlatan, he himself would have had none. For Maureen hadn't been since they all got back from England. She would come in the spring, she wrote; when the weather was better. It wouldn't be long now. There would be nothing they could do if she came now. She was glad he had the nice Mr. Riddling to visit him.

But as the spring approached the nice Mr. Riddling came less often, for as the plasterers and carpenters moved out of the old house the paper-hangers and painters and electricians moved in, and the proprietor had to be on the spot for a purpose he called 'jollyng them along'. Come-hell-or-high-water, he declared, jauntily, he was determined to open at Easter. The tourist season wouldn't begin until July, but there would be the odd motorist, and the bar would be open.

Gavin did walks with Laurence on the fine days and worked with Michael painting the boat. He could find his way down to the McManus cottage alone and would sometimes do so, to fetch eggs or milk, or merely as an objective for the walk. The children would see him coming down the lane with his white stick and run to fetch Michael, the one member of the family who had overcome self-consciousness sufficiently to write a few words in block capitals in the palm of his hand. Nice day, he would write, laboriously with an expression of intense concentration, for as the Franciscans who had tried to educate him had found, he was no scholar, or soft day, or wild day, as the case might be; what he said didn't matter, it was communication, the human contact he perpetually craved, the escape hatch from the darkness and silence.

He was intensely aware of the spring; of the feel of it on the air, and in his blood. He would grope through the grass on a roadside bank to find primroses, and when his fingers found them the uprush of joy would be followed by an unaccountable sense of inner weeping. He tried to make poetry of it, but it would not shape. He was tormented by erotic dreams and fantasies; some-

times the woman was Janice Berring, sometimes Kay Carter, sometimes, though less often, Maureen; sometimes she was a confused amalgam of all three; sometimes she was merely female, unidentified, a warmth and softness of breasts and lips and enfolding arms.

I shall go mad, he would think. My life is quite pointless. I can't work and I'm not allowed to love. People write to me and I write to them. I am twenty-one and I live my life on paper—on strips of tape punched with dots, on sheets of cardboard with raised dots. I eat and sleep and renew myself, but there's no point in it. None whatever. They say if you slash your wrists you can bleed to death. But which vein is it you must cut, and how long does it take. . . .

But then would come a lively letter from Hugh Ross or Maurice Berring, or a Brailled letter from Clare, all warmth and affection, inquiring what he was writing, perhaps praising some newly published poem, or gently reproaching him for not appearing in print lately, then his eager interest in life would reassert itself and his hands fly over the keys of his typewriter. Or on a warm day merely sitting on the balcony, with Laurence's knee pressed against his for contact, feeling the sun on his face and limbs, the movement of a breeze with the scent of gorse on it, would restore his zest for life. At such times he would succeed in getting something on to paper, and some of it would find its way into print, but it always fell short of the brilliance and intensity of the conception. Merriam continually urged him to 'keep at it'. A reputation could only be built up by a bulk of work persistently produced year after year, he declared. The first book attracted attention, the second confirmed that the first was no mere flash in the pan, but it was the third and the fourth and the fifth that counted, he insisted. Almost anyone who could write poetry could produce one slim volume, and most people who could produce one such volume could produce a second; the test came with the third and fourth, and, as Gavin already realized by now, he was sure, in order to produce a book of twenty poems it was necessary to write at least forty, just as photographers took three or more pictures to get the one they really wanted. Berring occasionally wrote in a similar strain. 'You must go on,' he would urge. 'You have made a start,

but it's a start only. You have demonstrated that you have the gift; now it remains to demonstrate its development . . .'

On his good days Gavin was grateful for the sustained interest and endorsed the counsel; on the black days he would tell himself despairingly that to find the uncreated light he must live, and that he merely existed in a living death.

Laurence was well aware of Gavin's moods and he understood them. Something had to happen, he felt, something which would give Gavin a deep, strong hold on life and fan the creative flame, which at times seemed about to expire among the ashes of bitterness and despair. If he could fall in love and be equally loved in return, marry, have children, create a world for himself outside of the double dark, he would have such a hold; it was possible, but not probable. Love he had already, but it was not a love to which he could respond, or even acknowledge, since his instincts were purely heterosexual. Maureen might be the answer if she could be unfixed from her fixation on someone completely useless to her. That infatuation must surely die of inanition. But at present it was keeping her away from Derrygimlagh, where her presence would have helped Gavin.

It was Basil Riddling, Laurence was bound to acknowledge, bouncing boisterously in and out like a great shaggy dog, who rescued Gavin from his fits of depression. He worked up a good speed in the hand language and he could always make Gavin laugh. Laurence was also bound to acknowledge that Riddling took a lot of trouble with Gavin, listening patiently to the long accounts of something he was reading which Gavin was inclined to give, and as patiently spelling out on the young man's hand, letter by letter, comments which even Laurence sometimes found amusing. Riddling had a capacity for never appearing tired, always appearing to enjoy his own life and to be interested in other people's.

He opened his hotel at Easter and no one, not even a motorist, came; but he was quite undaunted; for a housewarming he invited everyone he could lay hands on—Mr. Mangan, the McManuses, the local tradespeople, the parish priest and the Protestant parson and the two Englishmen from the Castle cottage. He put on a white

coat and served behind the bar, roaring with laughter and declaring himself like the man in the parable who sent his servant out into the streets and lanes, the highways and hedges, to bring in the poor and the maimed, the halt and the blind, to compel them to come in that his house might be filled. Shot full of free liquor—champagne for the ladies, whisky for the gentlemen—nobody minded being described in these Biblical terms, Father Riley and the Reverend Hawthorn least of all . . . though the Reverend Hawthorn was primly drinking orangeade to set the Catholics a good example. Father Riley felt himself under no such compulsion. From the pulpit at Mass he commonly urged his flock to take the pledge—knowing perfectly well that they would do no such thing—but with always the mental reservation that alcohol was for those who knew how to use it, of which select company he reckoned to be one.

Edna Riddling did not approve of inviting the rabble into their splendid new bar, so tastefully decorated, so freshly painted, and did not join the party. Basil enjoyed himself hugely in the role of Mine Host, in the great tradition of English inn-keepers, and endeared himself for ever to the natives.

Laurence did his best to tell Gavin who was there and to describe them. He repeated some of Basil's witticisms, but not the one about inviting the poor and the maimed, the halt and the blind. Gavin enjoyed the feeling of people all about him, of occasional strange hands grasping his to show friendliness even though they couldn't communicate, and the smell of tobacco smoke and drink. It gave him the feeling of life coming close to him.

There were a few guests at Whitsun, for the weekend, and a sprinkling throughout June, but they were all motorists staying only a night or two and then moving on. In July the real holiday-makers began to arrive. After dinner, on fine evenings, at their host's suggestion, they strolled along the lake and past the cottage where Gavin Edwards, the deaf-blind poet—'you probably saw him on television'—lived with his companion. This gave an objective to the stroll and sometimes they were rewarded by a glimpse of the interesting pair on their balcony. To Laurence's relief and Gavin's disappointment, however, none of them called.

In August the hotel was full and it was a tribute to Edna's cooking and Basil's hostmanship that although it rained almost every day the guests gallantly stuck it out their full time. When the rain cleared in the evenings, as it often did, they would set out in their raincoats and plastic mackintoshes for the after-dinner stroll to the head of the lake and back, always turning to gaze with interest at the balconied cottage above the road, a gesture which always aroused resentment in Laurence.

The hotel was always full; stray motorists had no chance of a bed there except on a settee in a lounge, and at the height of the season saturation point was reached even with that. Basil begged Laurence to take the odd guest—'Just the room,' he pleaded. 'Just the bed, not even breakfast.' He laughed, jollily. 'Not even the morning cuppa,' he added.

'I couldn't bear it,' Laurence told him. 'I don't like people enough.'

Basil twirled the ends of his preposterous moustache.

'I love 'em, you know! Find 'em endlessly fascinating. When I'm handing the dishes at table in the evenings I love the bits of conversation I overhear. I love to hear them earnestly ask each other, "Was it a Wednesday—or a Thursday?" as though it mattered. The fascinating part is that to the person pondering it it does matter! I love the school-teachers who bring their guide-books in to dinner with them, so as not to waste a minute between courses. I love to see the men being knowledgeable about wines, when the truth is they don't know one year from another. I love them, I tell you! I think they're wonderful. Smashing, as they say nowadays! I'm always so thankful to Almighty God for having the idea of making a human being!'

'Well I'm not. If I believed in God I'd say it was his initial error!'

Basil laughed, delightedly.

'But you wouldn't like to be sealed off from your fellow man like our young friend?'

'I would not. There are things I want to see—cats, for example. Even an occasional human being. Deafness I wouldn't mind much. Most sounds I can do without—including the human voice.'

'Well, it's a point of view. It bears out my contention that human beings are endlessly interesting. But now be a good chap and say you'll help me out with the odd visitor—I promise not to send anyone frightful or dreary. I don't want that sort myself. I always admired that hotelier who used to put a 'face' charge on the bill when he disliked a guest's face. A friend of mine who runs a guest-house in the Scottish Highlands was fearfully put out once when a couple of plain spinster ladies turned up asking for rooms. I was there at the time. He was in quite a rage. "How dare they come here with faces like that?" he cried. The beautiful part is he's as ugly as sin himself!'

He roared with laughter at the recollection. Laurence, unamused and seething with dislike, said, simply, 'Someone ought to knock his block off, just to learn him. Probably someone will sometime.'

'Probably. Probably,' Basil agreed, cheerfully. 'But to return to our muttuns. Be a good fellow and say I can send some suitable person up to you sometime—some nice young man—some charming young woman——'

'No,' Laurence said. 'It's out of the question. Sorry.'

Basil accepted his defeat with good humour. Some other time he would try again. No one could say no for ever. People could be worn down. The essential friability of human nature was one of its beauties.

On a pouring wet night a few weeks later he tried again. It was ten o'clock but still quite light, the daylight lasting almost an hour longer there in the far West. Laurence had seen the car driving along in the lane below and had a momentary wonder as to whom would be out driving on such a wild night. A few minutes later he heard the familiar heavy yet springy step striding up the path and opened the door to Basil, massive in dripping oilskins and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'It's too bad at this time of night, I know, but I'm in a spot. You must be a good fellow and help me out. This time you really must! I've slipped up. A booking made weeks ago and accepted and somehow got overlooked. The young lady arrived tonight and I'm choc-a-bloc—we've even got beds made up in bathrooms! Be

a good fellow and take the poor girl in just for tonight till I get sorted out.'

'It's impossible,' Laurence said, angrily. 'I've told you before! And then trying to sick a woman on me! Let her get herself fixed up in the town. Plenty of places there do bed-and-breakfast.'

'The town's packed out too.'

'Then let her sleep in her car!'

'She didn't come out by car. She came out on the late bus.'

'Oh, hell, then let her sleep in your car! I don't care where she sleeps, but she can't do it here! Good night!'

Laurence went inside and slammed the door. Basil shrugged. 'Eh, bien!'

He strode back down the path and the steep lane to the road below. The passenger in his car opened the door as he approached.

'No luck,' he said. 'We'll have to think of something else. We'll have to make you up a bed in the bar, or somewhere.'

'What did he say?'

'Just that he couldn't consider it—particularly as it was a woman. He's a bit of a misogynist.'

The woman laughed and stumped out the butt of her cigarette.

'Leave it to me. He'll take me in all right. Just walk up with me and leave me at the gate.'

He stared at her.

'What makes you think you'll succeed where I've failed?'

'Because I know him—Mr. Bloody Oakes! Don't look so startled! A journalist meets all sorts of people. I met him when his boy friend, Gavin, was doing his stuff on TV. I met him again later in Dublin. We know each other all right. It's Fate, don't you see? You making a muddle of my booking and there being no other place for me to stay but here. Me coming out here at all, not know—they were here. There's no denying Fate!'

He laughed.

'Mr. Bloody Oakes might still deny you admission!'

'He won't, you know. Come on, let's go . . .'

8

WHEN Laurence opened the door for the second time that evening he was furiously angry, believing Basil had returned to plead with him. He flung the door open and then in one white-hot blinding moment realized that the woman who stood in front of him with a car rug round her shoulders in the deluging rain was Kay Carter.

'How in hell——' he exclaimed, but she cut in on him.

'If you'll let me in I'll tell you. I'm drowned standing here.'

Involuntarily he stepped back. Only when she was inside did he realize she had a suitcase with her. She dumped the suitcase and flung the wet car rug on top of it, then untied her headscarf and pushed a hand through her hair.

'I had a reservation at the hotel but old Riddling overlooked it and they're full up, with people sleeping all over the place on settees and even in baths. He said perhaps he could get me a bed in a cottage up the road. He told me who lived there. I could hardly believe my ears. But I didn't let on. I told him not to tell you who I was in case you knew my name as a journalist and might be prejudiced. I wanted to surprise you!'

Her smile was derisive.

'That you are surprised is obvious. That you might be pleased is too much to expect!'

'Much too much.'

'You sound quite bitter. Gavin will be pleased, anyhow.'

She brushed past him to the living-room door. Although it was still light outside it was dusky in the house and Laurence had switched on a table-lamp, filling the room with a soft golden glow. Gavin sat near the lamp idly stroking the cat and waiting for

Laurence to return. He had been telling Laurence about some poems from the Chinese he had been reading and Laurence had suddenly interrupted to tell him there was a knock at the door again. 'It will be Basil back again,' he had added. Then Gavin had felt the movement of Laurence getting up.

He waited what seemed to him a long time, but all the waiting he did seemed long, and he seemed to spend most of his time waiting. Then he was aware of a movement, and, incredibly, a perfume. One he had remembered. Then hands that were not Laurence's were on his and lips brushed his cheek. Remembered lips.

'Kay!' he shouted and sprang to his feet, forgetting the cat, Laurence's presence, everything except that at last, miraculously, his wish of the twenty-one candles had come true.

His arms closed about her, violently, and he was kissing her in a frenzy of passion and joy, crying to her, almost sobbing with relief and joy.

'I've longed for you! If you knew how I've longed for you! They sent me here to get me away from you, so that you wouldn't find me. How did you know I was here?'

She brushed Gavin's hair back from his forehead, laughing excitedly, then fastened her mouth on his, and only when his hands began feverishly exploring her body remembered Laurence. She turned her head to implore him to leave them alone for a little, but he had gone.

Laurence went out of the house, walking blindly in the driving rain and the gathering dusk, walking without objective. Purely instinctively he turned his back on the hotel when he reached the road and headed out along the lake. Passing the McManus house he was aware of the red spot of light from the tiny lamp under the Sacred Heart on the kitchen mantelpiece. The house was in darkness; they were all in bed, watched over by the gentle Jesus. He envied them, passionately, the simplicity and profundity of their belief.

Beyond the lake a rough track of road wound on over the bog, leading nowhere except deeper into the bog and glimmering

whitely in the dusk. The rain lessened and finally ceased and a lopsided moon scudded through dark clouds. The road petered out beside some deep cuttings and he leaned up against a stack of cut turf and lit a cigarette, noticing as he did so that his hand was unsteady. He told himself that he must get a grip on himself; the situation had to be faced—and dealt with. Two lines from one of the Chinese poems Gavin had liked wandered into his mind: *'The gourd has still its bitter leaves, And deep the crossing at the ford.'* Very bitter, and very deep, he thought.

Gavin's overwhelming joy at the re-entry of Kay Carter into his life left him in no doubt that this was the great secret wish of his twenty-first birthday party. But he thought that innerly he had always known this. Undoubtedly, also, they were in bed together at this moment, and would stay there till morning. It would go on for as long as she chose to remain in Derrygimlagh, and Gavin would be deliriously happy—released, fulfilled, ecstatic—a young man in love for the first time, a young man who had desired intensely, with all the passion and poetry of his nature, and who had despaired of it ever happening to him, because of his affliction. And Kay Carter would wear him, this good-looking young lover, as a feather in her cap—one more feather in a cap that had already known too many. When her time was up in Derrygimlagh she would go back to London, and what happened, then, to Gavin? But his anguish and despair, his mental and physical torment, would mean nothing to her. She would have had her fun—and in how many bars and at how many parties would she recount it—'But however did you manage to talk to him in bed?'—and how in fact *was* she managing? he wondered, sardonically.

Gavin needed and had a right to a sex life; but that it had to be with this hard-bitten, hard-faced, hard-hearted tramp, who would sleep with him tonight and write a column about him tomorrow, who would doubly exploit him—that was very bitter.

There was no point, now, in their continuing to live in this Irish exile. Gavin would anyhow probably refuse to. He would probably want to live in London to be near his love. And if he chose to no one could stop him . . . provided the friend who was his eyes and ears and his contact with the world was willing to go

with him. And if that friend refused? Then he would be unhappy and depressed to the point of breakdown—and come to hate the friend who was frustrating his deepest desires.

Whatever happened, he thought, heavily, a phase had come to an end.

It was dark when he finally heaved himself up from the turf stack but a glimmer of moonlight picked out the road. The McManus dog barked as he passed, the sudden sound underlining the stillness of the night, the loneliness of the road.

The lamp was still on in the sitting-room when he got back to the house, but the room was empty, and no light showed under the door of the guest-room. He switched off the lamp and went into the room he shared with Gavin. For the first time since they had begun living together, four years ago, he was alone.

In the middle of his bed he found a sheet of paper across which Gavin had scrawled: 'Please don't be cross. I am so happy. My wish has come true. You said that whatever it was you would wish it along with me and I said I would remind you of that if ever it did.'

He took some sleeping tablets and wakened late in the morning. Kay was gone and Gavin was preparing breakfast.

At Laurence's touch on his arm he cried, eagerly, 'Hullo, Laurie! You had my note? You're not cross, are you? Say you're not cross? It was all so wonderful and I'm so happy. You'll see what poetry I'll write now that I'm alive—really alive!'

Laurence told him, 'I'm not cross. I just wonder how it will all end.'

Gavin laughed. 'Sufficient unto the day. Or rather the night.'

'Is she coming back tonight?'

'Of course, and every night until she goes back to London in a fortnight's time.'

'What is she doing here?'

'She just came for a holiday. She had been told about the Derrygimlagh Castle Hotel and she'd never been to the West before. She thought there might be a story in it. She says Ireland's full of old castles converted into hotels. She's thinking of making a tour of them and writing it up—"The Castle Hotels of Ireland". She says the Irish Tourist Board might be interested.'

'How did she manage to say all this to you? Did you take the Arcaid to bed with you?'

'What else could we do? But I'm teaching her the manual.'

'You're riding for a fall.'

Gavin cried, excitedly, 'How do you know? It doesn't mean to say that when she goes back to London we shall never meet again! You and I can go back to England to live. There's no point in staying buried alive here. I'm twenty-one now and can do as I like!'

'The Boss can stop your allowance!'

'What do I care? I can earn enough for myself, and if we're back in London you could get a hospital job again.'

'It's possible. But if Kay starts writing about you in her column again there will be a hell of a rumpus at Hayton House!'

'Why should I care? Oh, Laurie, be glad about everything! We'll go back to London and lead a more normal life! We'll be independent and free!'

Involuntarily Laurence exclaimed aloud, 'No one is ever free!' On Gavin's hand he said only, 'We'll see how it goes.'

CYCLING into the town that afternoon Laurence encountered Kay along the road. She was not strolling but walking purposefully and when she saw him she stood still in his path.

When he dismounted she said, unsmiling, 'I was on my way up to see you.'

'To see me?'

'Yes, you. I thought we ought to have a talk—come to an understanding.'

'Is this the best place for it—the middle of the road?'

'It's not exactly Piccadilly Circus.'

'I'm trying to get into the town before the mail goes out.'

'You will. It's not three yet and the mail doesn't go out till four—as you must know.'

He wheeled his bicycle to the side of the road and propped it up against a stone wall.

'O.K.,' he said, 'go ahead.'

'There has to be a show-down. It was obliging of you to go out and stop out last night but I ought to warn you I intend to be with Gavin every night—for the duration.'

He regarded her with distaste. She was, he supposed, very smart. Her suit well cut and of a very fine green tweed, and her hair no longer pink but some pale blonde shade and upswept to the crown of her head. She looked a good deal older than three years ago, he thought; that whatever she might do to herself she now looked forty. A hard-faced woman of forty—the young poet's mistress. . . . More personally—Gavin's lover.

She lounged against the wall and met his gaze coolly, in her own eyes more of contempt than any overt hostility.

He said, 'Have you thought how it's all going to end?'

'Isn't it a bit much to ask someone at the beginning of an affaire about the ending of it?'

'In such circumstances as this I'd have thought it legitimate.'

She shrugged.

'I have to return to London in a fortnight's time in any case. Then I have a job in Paris for a few months. I might take Gavin with me.'

'You can't do that!'

She smiled, then, insolently.

'Who's to stop me? He's a young man of twenty-two, now, isn't he?'

'He's also deaf-blind.'

'That doesn't bind him to you for ever! He has a right to a normal life. Why shouldn't we live together until the affaire dies a natural death?'

'Then what? Doesn't it mean anything to you that he's going to be badly hurt? It's his first affaire and he imagines himself in love!'

'He'll get over it—and live to love another day. Young men do.'

'With his disability it's not quite so easy for him. Even without that he's different—a poet. You can't do it to him!'

It took all his self-control not to shout at her. He felt the old violence rising in him. She should be struck down. Struck dead.

'If he chooses to come with me it's his own lookout. He's an adult person, not a schoolboy.'

'Are you prepared to keep him? His poems bring him very little, and you can't expect old-man Hayton to finance him to live with the woman who wrote that stinking article in the *Sunday Sensation*!'

At that she laughed outright.

'You're not really proposing to tell him, are you—Nicholas Laurence?'

He stared at her. He had a sensation of tight bands clamped round his head and of being suffocated by the force of the violence raging in him.

He asked after a moment, 'Where did you get that?'

'I took the trouble to look up your record.'

'What made you think I had one?'

'That scar. And something at the back of my mind. I haven't been in Fleet Street all these years for nothing.'

'And were you pleased with what you found?'

'Delighted! Theft of a bicycle at fourteen, Approved School, Borstal, prison—seven years' preventive detention last time following a series of convictions for housebreaking. Quite a record!'

She added, as he remained silent, 'The Haytons, not to mention Gavin, would be interested to know you were never a nurse at the hospital—just a menial—'

He found words then.

'I never gave out that I was a nurse. I merely said I worked there. Mrs. Williams knew I had no nursing training.'

'She doesn't know your criminal record either, in all probability, and you didn't mind letting it be assumed you were a trained nurse. Her ladyship and Sir James would be horrified if they knew they were paying an old lag to look after Gavin! His nibs would soon cut off supplies.'

'I can always get a job in a hospital.'

'Not if your record is known. Not in any general hospital. In a looney bin in the provinces, perhaps, where they're desperate for staff and not particular.'

She straightened herself up from the wall.

'One way and another it could be very unpleasant if the facts got around. Think about it. You might decide to let things take their course with Gavin and me.'

She smiled at him, waiting.

After a moment he said, wheeling his bicycle back into the road, 'What is Gavin to tell his mother if he goes to Paris with you?'

'For the present, nothing. I gather he seldom writes to her these days and she never comes here. He might send her a postcard from Paris and say he's there with you on a short holiday.'

He offered no comment, then, mounting the bicycle, asked, 'Are you going to tell Gavin my record?'

'Not for the present. I was rather holding that card.'

'Don't bother. I'll tell him myself when I get back. Make the most of my absence. I shan't be long.'

She watched him pedalling furiously towards the town, and when he was out of sight turned and strolled back to the hotel. She was tired; there had been very little sleep last night and there would be as little tonight. It would, in fact, probably be necessary to sleep every afternoon—for the duration.

IO

LAURENCE told Gavin, 'I met Kay along the road. She has found out something about me which you don't know. But I'd sooner tell you myself.'

Gavin laughed.

'I always knew you were a mystery man!'

'I told you I had a scar on my face. You've touched it. Didn't you ever wonder how I got it?'

'On and off. I didn't ask because I thought you'd tell me if you wanted me to know. I thought you might have been in some bad accident. Something you'd rather not talk about.'

'I got it in a fight. In the army. After the war I was in prison.'

'In prison? What were you in for? People go to prison for all sorts of things, don't they? For refusing to be conscripted, for demonstrating against nuclear weapons—'

'Nothing like that. Housebreaking. I graduated from Borstal.'

'Are you really a burglar? How exciting! My mother and the Boss would have a fit if they knew!'

'I'm relieved you don't take a moral line.'

'Why should I? You've been a wonderful friend to me. At one time I think I'd have died of depression without you. Going away with you to Devon that time meant everything to me. You probably didn't realize how much. I know I'm hell to live with a good deal of the time. Don't think I don't know and don't appreciate the way you put up with me. Only I'd have to write a poem about it to find words for what I think and feel about it all. Perhaps I will.'

He laughed, suddenly self-conscious.

'I get emotional too easily. But I'm sincere. You must believe that.'

Laurence pressed his hand, then told him, 'I do believe you, and I thank you. Do you mind if we talk a bit about Kay now?'

'Of course I don't.'

'She told me she might suggest you go to Paris and live with her.'

'Paris? How wonderful! But how would we manage? Her job, I mean? And what would you do? Would you come with us?'

'She has a job of some kind in Paris. But you shouldn't do it. If the Boss finds out he'll stop your allowance, but more important than that what would you do when the affaire came to an end?'

'Why should it come to an end? I would like to marry her. It's what I want—to be married, have children—why shouldn't I?'

'No reason at all, but Kay is not the woman for it. Marriage and children are not for her. Or even marriage without children. She would never agree to it. Ask her and see.'

'It's too soon yet. I want to ask her the night before she goes back to London. Then perhaps we could go to Paris for our honeymoon!'

'I told you before—you're riding for a fall.'

'I'm enjoying the ride, anyhow!'

'Presently you will suffer.'

'I'll take a chance.'

In despair Laurence tried another tactic.

'She's anyhow nearly twenty years older than you!'

'What does that matter?'

'It doesn't matter now, perhaps, but when you're thirty and still a young man she'll be a woman in late middle age.'

'I won't know because I won't see it happening. She'll always be the same to me—beautiful as Cleopatra, and with all her attributes.' He laughed, happily. 'Come to think of it, Cleopatra wasn't young either when she had her affaire with Antony!'

Laurence persisted, 'If she gets fat you will know it. And you'll feel the lines in her face, the sag under the chin. You'll know all right. Don't deceive yourself.'

'Perhaps you're right. I can't think that far ahead. I can't think any further ahead than that tonight I'll hold her naked in my arms

again! I can't help it! I'm bewitched. Haven't you ever been in love?'

Laurence took his hand away for fear of betraying himself on the listening fingers.

O God, O God, O God!

He clenched his hands between his knees, words hammering in his brain. I love, his mind shouted. I love so much I could die of it, and for it. And I know all about sex as the great betrayer. You little fool! 'So happy and hopeless.' When she gets back to London she may not even want you to go to Paris with her. And if you do go it'll all be over in a month.

He recovered himself and took Gavin's hand to say on it, 'I've loved, which is more important. Romantic passion doesn't last. It can't. It consumes itself. What you and Kay want with each other is sex. Love doesn't come into it.'

'All a wonder and a wild desire, as it says in the poem. Isn't that love?'

'No. Love is caring—first and last. Caring for the other person's good. And the sense of belonging. You and Kay don't belong with each other. You're poles apart.'

'It's no good, Laurie. I need her!'

'You need someone, but Kay isn't the answer. Maureen might be.'

'She wouldn't have me. We know each other too well. Since we were children. We're like brother and sister. Anyhow, what's the good of even thinking about anyone else, when I'm in love with Kay?'

Laurence gave up. When Kay arrived at about ten o'clock he went out.

Later he sat in his room writing to Maureen.

'You must come,' he wrote to her. 'You will get this letter Thursday and I beg you to pack a bag and come on Friday and stay at least for the weekend. You must believe that it's important. The spring and summer have come and gone and you haven't come, but now you must. The opening of the hotel here has changed Gavin's life in the most disastrous fashion and I am powerless to

help—except by sending for you! If you aren't moved to come for Gavin's sake then come for mine. I am down on my knees to you—beseeching you!

It was emotional blackmail, he told himself, but he had to get her there. She was his only hope.

It worked, as he knew it would, that come-for-my-sake. She wired that she would be arriving by the evening bus on Friday.

Gavin was quite as annoyed as Laurence had expected him to be when he learned that Maureen was coming for the weekend.

'We can't have her just now,' he declared. 'You must send a wire putting her off. Why does she have to come now after stopping away for so long? She can come when Kay's gone back. We can't have her just now anyhow—there's nowhere for her to sleep.'

'I can get her a room in one of the small hotels in the town.'

'But she'll be here all day and I don't *want* her just now!'

'Kay is never here in the day time.'

'She's not the only one who has to catch up on her sleep during the day!'

'You don't sleep for the whole of the day. I can look after her for the rest of the time.'

'I dare say, but I'm not in the mood for her—as you must know. Are you going to tell her Kay's here?'

'She's sure to run into her.'

'Are you going to tell her what's going on?'

'She will know anyhow. Kay comes at all hours.'

'She will be shocked to bits.'

'Probably. Do you mind?'

'She was always very sweet to me. We're fond of each other. I'd be sorry to upset her.'

'She'll probably think you more sinned against than sinning!'

Gavin snatched his hand away, angrily.

'If you have any consideration for either of us you'll not let her come up here but send her back on the morning bus.'

Laurence offered no comment, but merely pressed Gavin's arm in the agreed sign to indicate that he was leaving the room.

The subject was not referred to again that day. In the afternoon

Laurence cycled into the town to secure a room for Maureen, but when Kay arrived that evening he told her, 'Miss Edwards will be here tomorrow.'

'Miss Edwards? Oh—Gavin's little Irish cousin? The horsey girl I met at the Villa Napoli? Is she staying? Where will you put her? The hotel's still full and there's no-room-in-the-inn here either.'

'I've got her a room in the town.'

'But why does she have to come just now of all times? Can't she wait till I've gone back?'

'No. It had to be now.'

'Is she in trouble or something?'

'She's not in the family way, if that's what you mean.'

'I don't mean. She's a high-powered virgin, obviously, and likely to stay that way if she doesn't watch out! Whatever it is she won't be pleased to see Miss Carter of the *Sunday Sensation* here and to discover that that dreadful woman is sleeping with her precious cousin! Not that I care!'

'Then you don't have to worry, do you?'

He took his raincoat down from a hook on the back of the door.

'You don't have to go out, you know. Can't you just go to your room and read or write letters or something?'

'I could, I suppose, if I plugged my ears. I prefer to go out.'

'As you please.'

She went through into the sitting-room where Gavin waited, repeatedly moving a finger over the face of his Braille watch.

The following evening after the meal he told Gavin, 'I'm going in to meet Maureen. Kay will come up earlier, I expect. I shall be back late, as usual.'

'Do you have to go out every time Kay's here?'

'I prefer to. It's only for another week now.'

'There's no need to rub it in.'

'Are you planning to travel back to London with her?'

'No. She has things to do before she leaves for Paris. When she's there I'll fly direct from Dublin as soon as she's arranged for me.'

'You intend to travel alone?'

'Why not? If you get me to Collinstown once I'm aboard

the 'plane I'm looked after and Kay will meet me at Le Bourget.'
'You've got it all worked out.'

'Yes. We've got it all worked out. I'm taking Minna, by the way. She'll be company for me when Kay is out on her job.'

'What happens to this place?'

'Nothing for the present. I want to see how things go. If I can get Kay to agree to our being married perhaps the Boss would allow us to keep it on to come to sometimes—it doesn't cost much in the way of rates. You could just shut it all up and go to London.'

'I see.'

'Now you're all hurt and offended! Don't be! You always said you wanted me to be happy, and this is it.'

Aloud Laurence cried, 'I still want you to be happy. With all my heart I want it! But this isn't it!'

On Gavin's hand he said only, 'I'm not hurt. I must go now.'

'Call in at the hotel and tell Kay to hurry—hurry—'

Laurence merely gave the departure sign and went out to the turf shed for his bicycle. He did not call in at the hotel. Once he had wheeled the bicycle down the garden path he never gave it another thought. Memories occupied him all the way into the town, and in particular a memory of visiting the Rose Garden in Regent's Park six years ago, and of sitting under the trees beside the lake and Gavin insisting on his need for someone he could rely on absolutely, and being afraid that he, Laurence, might get married, or die, and only being reassured when he received the promise that their association was for as long as he wanted. It was Gavin who had said that it should be 'until death do us part'. He had laughed happily, then, anxiety subsiding in him.

Then he had been a boy of sixteen, newly plunged into the world of darkness and silence and not yet adjusted to it; now he was adult, twenty-two, had some reputation as a poet, and was passionately involved in the traditional first sex-affaire with a woman considerably older than himself. If only he would see it as a young man's first experience which would run its brief course then recede into the background to give place to experiences less ephemeral. But powerfully driven by the sexual impulse he believed himself in love, that this released torrent of desire was a

great and abiding love. The heart has its reasons—no, not the heart, quite another part of the anatomy. No wonder the emblem of Shiva the Destroyer is the phallus.

The room he had taken for Maureen was clean and bare, polished brown linoleum on the floor, clean white lace curtains at the window, which looked out into the main street, wide and dirty, with small shops, and corner-boys sitting on the window-ledge, with no further excitement to relieve their boredom now that the evening bus was in. Above the brass bedstead with a clean white honeycomb-counterpane was a picture of 'Our Lady of Perpetual Succour', pleasant in its blues on a gold background, and above the ugly black fireplace with a fan of pleated white paper in the hearth, a lithograph of the Immaculate Conception, Mary standing on top of the world, with a halo of stars.

Maureen thought the room bleak and cold, and with all the force of her Protestant upbringing she detested the pictures. It had been a shock to her when Laurence walking away from the bus with her had explained that she couldn't stay at the cottage. To be required to stay all alone in this dingy tenth-rate hotel because that horrible woman was at the cottage seemed to her quite simply preposterous. She was tired from the long bus ride, and hungry, and had looked forward to reviving in the pleasant atmosphere of the little house above the lake, talking on hand to Gavin whilst Laurence prepared the meal they would all three share. Then this bare hotel bedroom looking across to O'Toole's the butcher's, followed by descent to the ugly dining-room with its faded paper flowers and bottles of sauce on the tired-looking white tablecloths. She felt dispirited to the point of tears. Laurence ordered whiskies. She protested that she never drank spirits.

'Drink it,' he commanded. 'Derrygimlagh doesn't run to champagne, except at Mr. Riddling's posh hotel, where I couldn't fix you because it's full up with top tourists. Drink up, like a good girl. It'll do you good.'

He swallowed his own drink and called for two more. Whilst Maureen was gingerly sipping her first he explained the situation to her, not sparing her.

She was appalled rather than morally shocked.

'What can he see in her?' she cried.

He reminded her, 'He can't see her, except in his mind.'

'I know. But blind people have an idea of what people are like—they know by touch.'

'To the touch she is feminine and soft. She also uses very good perfume. She is also not merely willing but eager to give what Gavin needs, and she has a great deal of experience behind her. In short she fills the bill!'

'It's too awful! Gavin was always such a sweet person! And then to get mixed up with a woman like that! But there's one comfort—it can't last!'

A good-natured looking waitress deposited tea-things and plates of egg-and-bacon, and soda-bread, on the table and, smiling, inquired would there be anything else now? Laurence transferred the bacon on his plate to Maureen's, and ordered two more whiskies.

'But I haven't finished my first,' Maureen protested.

'Well then finish it and get going on the second one that does you good! You'll need it. You haven't heard the worst yet.'

'What's that?'

'Drink up first.'

She drained her glass, shuddering slightly.

'Now, then!'

He said, buttering a hunk of bread, 'If we're not careful he'll marry her.'

'Marry her? She must be forty by now!'

'Easily.'

'Gavin's twenty-two—young enough to be her son!'

'Such marriages occur—particularly when there's money and a good social background on one side.'

She said, violently, attacking her food, 'Gavin won't have a penny if he marries her—Sir James would never stand for it!'

'She wouldn't know that. The old boy would probably settle for a divorce with good alimony, to be shot of her. Whatever the outcome it could only mean unhappiness for Gavin. He's completely obsessed by her. It's understandable. She's the only

woman who has ever approached him in that way, and he hasn't a choice. Apart from his physical passion for her he has a passion of gratitude. It makes a formidable combination, you know! He plans to join her in Paris shortly. They'll live together and it's then he hopes to persuade her that they should be married.'

She put down her knife and fork and stared at him aghast.

'He must be crackers!'

'He's madly in love, or thinks he is. It comes to the same thing.'

He raised his glass to her. 'Drink up. Here's hoping!'

She gulped the whisky down, then demanded, 'What is there to hope for? Except that it all fizzles out.'

'It won't do that for a long time. What we have to hope for is to find a solution—a way of ending it before the worst happens. Before he goes off to Paris with her and persuades her during the honeymoon to marry him!'

She ate in silence for a minute or two, then said, 'Why should we bother? People make their own lives—why shouldn't Gavin be left to? Other young men have made disastrous marriages and had their hearts broken and survived it. It's happening all the time.'

'You know the answer as well as I do. We have to try and rescue Gavin because he's different—not only because he's doubly afflicted and therefore an easy victim for any unscrupulous female but because he's a poet.'

She was silent, brooding, and he added, 'I know poetry can be created out of sorrow and suffering, but this woman could destroy Gavin. There's a good deal of latent hysteria in him, aggravated by his condition. When this woman tires of him, which she will, even if she marries him, he won't create poetry out of his suffering; he'll have a nervous breakdown. I haven't lived day and night with him for six years without learning something about his mental and emotional makeup. I know what goes on in him, the states he gets himself into over the smallest things. I have never been so sure of anything in my life as that nothing but tragedy can come out of his relationship with this woman if it's allowed to continue.'

'But how can you or I stop it? And even if we could, that would be tragedy for him, too! Now that he's got himself mixed up with her it seems he's got to suffer whatever happens!'

'That's true. But there are degrees of suffering. If she decided to finish with him when she got back to London he would be frantic for a time, but only for a time, because no deep roots have been put down—I mean in the way they're put down when people live together. And if some other female were around, someone sweet and kind and gentle, someone whose bosom he could weep on, someone who would put arms round him, my guess is that he would be tucked up happily in bed with her in less than no time! Don't look so scandalized—human nature is as it is. Have you lived such a sheltered life you've never heard the old saying about driving an old nail out by driving a new nail in?'

She poured stewed dark brown tea and ladled sugar into it.

'You're so cynical always!'

'Maureen, for God's sake, it's the one thing I'm not! Gavin is the one human being in the world I care about. I know him as well as one human being can ever hope to know another, and I also know something about human nature in general. I've observed it at very close quarters.'

'Working in hospitals, you mean?'

'Yes. And elsewhere. I've seen what people can do to each other, and how they can suffer, and how they can be rescued from the bottomless abyss.'

She laughed for the first time.

'You sound like God, all-seeing and all-knowing.'

'Why not the devil? If you believe in the one you must believe in the other, and the devil probably sees and knows as much, arriving at the same conclusions from a different angle!'

He smiled, sombrely.

'Swallow that last tot and let's go out and get some air. Wouldn't you like to stretch your legs after four hours in a train and another four hours in a bus?'

'Yes, let's go for a walk. Need I take the drink?'

'It's not compulsory but it might improve the general outlook.'

She swallowed it and he summoned the waitress for the bill. Paying it he said, 'I am taking Miss Edwards out and may bring her back late. Don't lock her out.'

The waitress smiled, pleasantly.

'You'll be going to the dance?'

'Probably. Will it be very late?'

'It doesn't usually finish till around two, but don't worry, there are others will be coming in at that time.'

'I'll bring her back before then.'

Outside, he said, 'What about walking round to the other side of the lake? We won't meet people then. The other way we'll meet people from the Castle taking their after-dinner stroll, and old Basil with them, as likely as not, pointing out the local sights, the chief of which is the residence of the deaf-blind young poet.'

'Is that horrible woman supposed to be staying there?'

'She has a room there, yes. The first few mornings she went back there for breakfast, but the last two mornings they've made tea in their room with the electric kettle and then she's gone for a swim before going to the hotel. I suppose she thinks it looks better to give the appearance of having just returned from a swim before breakfast.'

'Does she really go in, do you think?'

'She goes in all right. I watched her from the balcony this morning.'

'Have you been swimming this summer?'

'A few times, when we've had the boat out, but lake-swimming's cold, and there's an awful lot of weed.'

'Wouldn't it be wonderful if——'

She broke off.

'Well, go on. Wouldn't it be wonderful if——?'

'Nothing. Cross it out. We shouldn't have bad wishes about people even if we hate them.'

'You were going to say wouldn't it be wonderful if Miss Carter got tangled up with the weed one fine morning after a night of love and——'

'Don't say it! Please don't say it! We must never wish people dead!'

'Why ever not? There are quite a few people I would wish dead! Kay Carter is one of them. Why not say it out loud? Oh, but I forgot! You're Christian, and have to love your fellow man, not to mention your fellow woman, whether you do or not!'

'Now you're laughing at me!'

'A little, but I'm serious too.'

They followed the road out of the town and came between fuchsia hedges and stone walls to the lake. There was the thin treble of oyster-catchers calling as they skimmed over the shadowy water, and at the other end of the lake the barking of a dog. The hills loomed dark and mountainous against the sky. The water-birds and the distant dog merely underlined the deep silence and stillness. But for the two who tramped through the deepening dusk there was no peace; the thoughts of both were on the Castle cottage. They walked without speaking until they had gone round the end of the lake and were following the road at the other side. Now across the water the lighted windows of the Castle were visible and beyond it the white glimmer of the cottage perched up on its high ground, and in the distance the dim glow of light which was the single lamp in the McManus kitchen.

'Let's sit for a few minutes and have a cigarette and try to think what to do.'

They sat on the wall beside the lake and lit cigarettes and stared at the water reflecting the hotel lights. No light showed in the windows of the cottage.

Laurence said, after a few moments, 'It all rests with you, really, you know.'

'What on earth can I do?'

'Grab him back from the other woman!'

'You speak as though she took him away from me.'

'She's taken him away from us both—from all of us who care about him. Only you can get him back. He would turn to you, given the chance, but for her. Once she's gone back to London he's all yours—if you go the right way to work!'

'What you're asking is impossible, and you know it. Gavin and I are not in love with each other.'

'All the better. You're spared the pain of falling out of love! Who are you going to marry if you don't marry Gavin?'

'How do I know? I never meet anyone who attracts me in that way.'

'Exactly. You go dancing and riding and sailing with young

men and none of them interest you enough. Truth to tell they bore you, once you've left the ballroom or got down from the horse! You're twenty-four now, aren't you, and the shelf begins to loom. Are you going to be content to sit there dangling your pretty legs to no purpose?'

'You know quite well I'm in love with someone and it's no good! You're being unkind.'

'I'm not being unkind. I'm being realistic. Every old maid, I suppose, has got a story of frustrated love tucked away somewhere. You're being a fool, you know, Maureen. Gavin is in bed with that woman now because you've always thought him too young for you and have a fixed idea that you can only be like brother and sister together. Perhaps when you were nineteen and he was seventeen he was too young for you, but he's not too young for you now that he's twenty-two and you're twenty-four. That first time he came to your home together he was enamoured of you, but you wouldn't play. Instead, you developed a girlish infatuation for a surly scar-faced man you knew nothing about and whom you left cold!'

She got up from the wall, flinging her cigarette into the lake.

'Well I'm cured of all that now! I think you're quite horrible! I shall go home tomorrow. I was a fool to come. It's all quite pointless. I can't help Gavin, any more than you can. What's more I don't think we've any right to try to interfere. People must live their own lives. Gavin has to learn by his mistakes the same as anyone else. I'm going back.'

He got up.

'That was quite a speech. But you weren't a fool to come because it *isn't* all pointless and you *can* help Gavin, whatever you may think and feel and say. You can help get the poison out of his system when she's gone.'

They walked along together in the direction of the town in silence. Finally she said, 'When she's gone it won't be long before he joins her, from what you told me.'

'That's what we have to prevent.'

'Have you the faintest idea how?'

'Until this evening I hadn't. Now at the back of my mind something begins to stir.'

'Can't you tell me?'

'No. We just have to see how events shape. Come up tomorrow morning and spend the day with us. When she arrives we'll go.'

'I'd rather not meet her. I feel I couldn't bear to! I don't really feel I want to meet Gavin just now—whilst all this is on. He probably doesn't particularly want to see me, either.'

'I think you'll find that if you come to the cottage and take his hand you'll both find yourselves back where you were before all this business began. I'd like you to come. Must I go down on my knees to you again?'

'You're a terrible person! You make me feel I don't know whether to laugh or cry! How can a girl cope with you at all?'

'A girl can't. But I do love you in my own no-good-to-you fashion!'

He was astonished at how easily the lie could be uttered. He felt a little mean, but he had to keep her on his side—and in Derrygimlagh. He was conscious of the despair in her when she said, 'Loving and being in love are very different, aren't they? I love Gavin, but it's not the wonderful exciting thing that being in love is.'

'And which is the world's illusion! Ancient and universal! Gavin is in love with that woman, and she probably tells herself she's in love with him, the handsome afflicted young poet. What she means is that he's a good lay and at her age she's lucky to have landed him, and that he can't see her is all to the good. He probably believes he loves her. Sex is the great deceiver as well as the great betrayer.'

'Haven't you ever been in love—or believed you were?'

'Yes—which is why I know. But more importantly—you'll come and spend the day with us tomorrow, and remain for the duration, and after?'

'If it would really help.'

'Why should I send for you so specially if it wouldn't?'

'Perhaps we could swim and take the boat out, the three of us, like we did at the Villa Napoli?'

'It's difficult to get Gavin interested in anything just now. He

just sleeps and waits for his love. We could suggest the boat, anyhow, but the swimming's no good here—too much weed, and icy cold.'

'You said Kay Carter swims before breakfast!'

'She's done so the last few mornings. Showing-off, I suspect. She goes in naked, and she must know she's visible from the balcony of the cottage.'

'Not to mention the hotel and the road!'

'No. There's a little cove where two arms of land run out into the lake. Perhaps you haven't noticed? It's a sheltered spot and anyone swimming there wouldn't be seen from the hotel or the road. We could go there tomorrow. It might be a good idea to try it out.'

When he had taken Maureen back to her hotel he went into a dark little bar full of smoke and the smell of porter and the noise of drunken haranguing voices. He sat on a wooden bench, bicycle wheels dangling above his head, his back against a barrel. Various drunks attempted to embroil him in their arguments, but he smiled vaguely through the smoke haze and they concluded he was even drunker than they were and the power of speech gone from him, the creature, and left him to his thoughts, which occupied him until they all streeled out into the unmade street, with meaningless shouts and broken bits of Fenian song, to spew in the gutter or urinate against a wall, in token protest against the untimely precipitation into yet another day.

Maureen walked out from the town after breakfasting in the hotel and reached the cottage about ten o'clock. She found Laurence busy with chores and Gavin still in bed.

'He'll sleep till midday,' Laurence told her. 'He always does when he doesn't get up. Other days he gets up and goes back to bed in the afternoons. This morning sleep is in your honour—so that we can take the boat out this afternoon. I thought we might go for a swim this morning—the day looks like hotting up. Did you bring a swimsuit? Or are you going in like Miss Carter?'

'I brought a swimsuit. But supposing Gavin wakes up whilst we're at the lake?'

'He'll know where we've gone. I told him if it was a nice morning I'd suggest it to you. He is quite capable of making breakfast for himself.'

Maureen exclaimed about the garden, gay with late summer flowers.

'It's all grown up so since I was here. It's all so beautiful—the garden—the view—could you bear to give it all up?'

'Gavin seems to think it should all be kept on—a place to retreat to on and off. It all depends how things shape.'

'Would you stay on here alone?'

'It would be quite pointless. I'd go back to London and hope for another hospital job, and do the work I was doing with the deaf-blind in my off-duty time, as before.'

'You speak as though it might not happen——'

He shrugged.

'Who knows? As a horsewoman you'll know about the gap between the stirrup and the ground.'

'It's a quotation, isn't it? Something about mercy I asked, mercy I found.'

'Something like that, yes. Let's go—before the day clouds over, as it's apt to do in these parts.'

The lake was at all points some distance from the road, its coast-line irregular and bounded in places by low cliffs. Promontories thrusting out into the water formed bays and coves with narrow stretches of sandy foreshore. In other places there was a deep sedge, frequented by herons. The approach to the lake was over rough bouldery ground covered with gorse, heather, brambles, and in the wet places meadowsweet and purple loosestrife.

Laurence took the girl's hand and they plunged through the summery wilderness and descended to a sandy cove which trapped the sun. There was no sedge here but a dark green mat of underwater weed.

'Beyond the weed it shelves steeply and is deep—and horribly cold. Perhaps we could swim out to that first island—or is that too far?'

'No. Race you!'

'Sorry. I'm a strong swimmer, but not a fast one. But I'll have a shot at doing it underwater, once we're clear of the weed.'

They waded in, the weed clinging round their legs, and when they were clear of it struck out for the island. After a few overarm strokes Maureen turned her head to see where Laurence was only to find he was out of sight. He surfaced ahead of her, a few yards from the island, spluttering and exploding.

'I couldn't make it,' he said, as they scrambled ashore, 'it was too far. My lungs were bursting. Anyhow I can still do it!'

'Is that important?'

'To me—yes.'

He stretched out on a grassy bank crowned by a fuchsia bush crimson with flower.

'I have two great wishes,' he said, closing his eyes against the sun.

Maureen, sitting with her chin propped on her knees and trying not to shiver, turned her head slightly to look at him.

'You wish you had a cigarette.'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Because I wish it too!'

'And the other wish?'

'Oh—I expect you wish Gavin were here!'

'Yes. Don't you?'

'I don't think so. No. Definitely no. Two is always better than three.'

'You liked our threesomes at the Villa Nardi. And when you first came here.'

'Everything was different then.'

I wasn't in love with you, she thought, and Gavin and I were close.

'Everything was simple, then,' she added.

'Life changes.'

She offered no comment and after a moment he said, 'Why don't you stretch out for a few minutes and let the sun soak into you?'

He pulled her down beside him.

'Relax!'

'I can't. I'm cold. My hands are dead.'

He sat up then and took both her hands between his and chafed them, briskly.

'You must have bad circulation,' he observed, severely.

'I circulate very well, normally.'

She sounded wan. He suspected a deliberate ambiguity and he as deliberately ignored it, continuing to rub her hands vigorously, skilfully, for a minute or two longer.

Then he released them, and inquired, 'That better?'

'Yes, thanks.'

She felt small, meek—and discarded.

'Then we'll get back.'

'Are you going underwater again—for practice?'

'No. I don't want to get mixed up with all that weed. It's a death trap. I'd be swimming straight into it.'

Gavin, waking around midday, asked, 'What time is it, Kay?' Then remembered that Kay had gone back to the hotel hours ago. He groped on the bedside table for his watch and passed his fingers over the unglazed dial. He sat up, swung his legs out of bed, shuffled his feet into his slippers, then made for the door. 'You there, Laurie?'

He waited for the familiar touch on his shoulder and when nothing happened groped his way to the kitchen and opened the back door and called again. All that happened was the rush of Minnaloushe between his legs, escaping into the open.

He concluded that Laurie had gone out—into the town for some shopping, perhaps, or down to the McManuses for something. Then he remembered that Maureen was due to arrive yesterday evening and the thought oppressed him. Perhaps Laurie had gone in to meet her—bring her back to lunch. If she stayed long enough she would run into Kay. Well, that was her affair. He had enough to cope with. He filled the electric kettle and plugged it in and assembled a mug, milk, the tea-caddy. Whilst waiting for the kettle to boil he leaned against the lintel of the back door, grateful for the air. He felt that it was a warm day but there was a cool wind somewhere in it, blowing in from the Atlantic. His head ached, and was full of noises. There were these bad days, still,

with roarings in his ears and a throbbing like a dynamo in his head.

He went back into the kitchen and sat down on a chair burying his face in his hands.

I need a night's rest, he thought. It's not the same sleeping in the daytime. I ought to send Kay back to the hotel tonight. Afterwards. But when the time comes I won't want to let her go. I want to hold her in my arms for ever. Laurie must hate it all so much. But I can't help it. He must see that I can't help it. I had to wait so long. He can't grudge it to me now.

He got up and felt the side of the kettle. It was hot. He held up a hand to feel the steam and decided that the kettle was boiling. He made tea, pouring the water in carefully. He poured a little milk into the mug, filled the mug with tea, and moved cautiously back towards the bedroom.

I'd better get some clothes on if Maureen is coming to lunch. I'd better get washed and shaved. And cover up this en Seamèd bed. I suppose that's how poor old Laurie thinks of it. Better do the bed first in case he gets back any minute.

When he had made the bed he sat down, feeling exhausted.

I'll feel better after I've rested this afternoon, he thought. Then remembered that he wouldn't be able to rest, because Maureen would be there; he would be expected to go for a walk with her, or perhaps Laurie would suggest taking the boat out—and they would pretend that everything was just the same as in the old days when the brush of Maureen's hair against his cheek as she bent her head to speak on his hand, and the smell of her skin, could heat his blood and quicken his heart.

But all that was over now; as over as the Devon days, and the days when the Villa Napoli was home. Home now was any room that had a bed in it, and a door to lock, and in which he held Kay in his arms.

He gulped the hot sweet tea down and felt better, though the noises roared and hammered in his head. He made his way into the improvised bathroom, stood in the bath and poured cold water from a jug over his body, shuddering at the impact but feeling it revive him.

When Laurence and Maureen got back he was reclining on the balcony in a deck-chair, his long legs stretched out, his face lifted to the sun. He had put on clean jeans and a dazzlingly white shirt and looked, Maureen thought, with an uprush of the old affection, quite heart-stirringly attractive.

Laurence went over to him, laid a hand on his shoulder, then told him, 'Maureen is here.'

Gavin smiled.

'Hullo, stranger,' he cried, and heaved himself up out of the low chair and held out both hands to her. She took them and he pulled her to him and kissed her forehead.

She then took his left hand to say, 'It's lovely to see you again.'

He laughed.

'I only wish I could see you! Is your hair still red? You haven't gone blonde or anything?'

She told him, 'I'm just the same.'

Laurence took his hand to tell him they should go in. Maureen took Gavin's arm, but he disengaged it and placed it round her shoulder.

'I'd forgotten how little you were,' he remarked, and immediately she recollected that Kay was tall.

Laurence had laid the table for lunch and prepared a cheese salad.

'We keep up our vegetarian habits,' he told Maureen.

He drew the cork of a bottle of *vin rosé*, bought in Galway and put by for a special occasion, he explained. He drank most of it himself, but that was their fault rather than his—Gavin was afraid of aggravating his headache and Maureen protested that she could never drink 'in the middle of the day'. She drank a glass full in the spirit of one who only does it to oblige, and Laurence felt irritated. Gavin drank only half of his second glass and declared his intention of taking aspirin before coffee. He fired a number of questions at Maureen, about his grandparents, the Paynes, what she had been doing, and being out of practice with manual speaking her replies were slow and laborious.

Laurence put fruit and cheese on the table and went into the kitchen to grind coffee. He prided himself on his coffee. He

acknowledged that as a party the occasion had been a flop, but it was all the same desperately important that Maureen should be there—and should stay.

He dissolved some tablets stronger than aspirin in a glass of water for Gavin and took it to him. It took effect fairly quickly and he felt better, but after coffee excused himself to Maureen saying he must go to his room and lie down. Laurence and Maureen continued to sit on the balcony in the sun, but now Laurence was as unrelaxed as the girl.

'Gavin's nervously and physically exhausted after ten nights of that woman,' he said violently.

'Why don't you tell her when she comes this evening?'

'I shall. But it'll make no difference. She's a man-eater, that one!'

'Couldn't you forbid her the house?'

'It's not my house. And imagine the scene with Gavin! I told you—I can't quarrel with him.'

'It's too awful. I wish she'd drop dead!'

'You don't wish it more than I do, I can assure you! But people don't drop dead for the wishing, unfortunately. Or perhaps fortunately. There'd be a considerable thinning of the world population if they did!'

'People die in 'plane crashes and get killed on the roads—all sorts of things can happen.'

'They also commonly live to be eighty and more!'

He got up and leaned on the rail of the balcony, his arms out over the balustrade, his hands clenched.

He said after a moment, with a vehemence that startled the girl, 'She's destroying him, physically and in all the other ways a human being can be destroyed. It'll go on until he's no more use to her—or himself. Then she'll throw him aside. That would be his second death-in-life, and that sort of thing can't happen twice without proving fatal. Ever since he was sixteen he's been balanced very precariously over the edge of the abyss. He's in a state of nervous tension all the time. It would take very little to push him over the edge into insanity.'

'Supposing he joins her in Paris and they get married?'

'Nothing would be changed. He's sex-obsessed at present, but that can't last. Satiation point has to be reached. But he will reach it first. Then when he begins to fail her she'll have less and less use for him and eventually none at all. That won't worry her. There'll be divorce, and she'll see to it there's good alimony.'

'Then he's free of her, and you wouldn't let him down. He'd recover, surely, with your help—like from a long illness, and next time he fell in love it would be with someone more suitable.'

'It's a nice idea, but you're thinking in terms of a normal young man, in full possession of all his faculties, and minus the artistic temperament. You overlook the fact that Gavin is minus two very important faculties, that he lives in a world of darkness and silence, broken into only by the touch of talking fingers. And that he has the hypersensitivity of the poet into the bargain.'

'Perhaps if you pointed all this out to her—I know she's hard and cynical and all that, but she can't be absolutely heartless. No one is.'

He spun round with an exclamation of impatience.

'Whatever makes you think that? You evidently don't know the facts of life! Don't you know history? Don't you read the newspapers? Day after day, year in and year out, there's evidence of man's monstrous inhumanity to man. There are people who are what we call heartless, and they neither began nor ended with the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps! There is absolute evil in the world, and it can be incarnate in a single individual. People who live entirely for themselves and use other people for their own ends with complete indifference as to what happens to them afterwards. This woman is a case in point.'

She was silent, distressed. Finally she said, 'If it works out as you say and Gavin has a breakdown—people do recover from breakdowns, don't they—sometimes?'

'Sometimes. They also sometimes commit suicide. That would be very easy for Gavin. It's something he's often thought of.'

She cried out at that.

'That can't be true!'

'It is true. The night of his twenty-first birthday party when we were alone he collapsed into terrible despair. His wish when he

blew out the candles was to meet this woman again and for things to be as they are now.'

'Oh, no! I can't bear it.'

She covered her eyes with her hand to hide the tears.

'Well, it's true. And she's coming here again tonight, and for the next three nights. Unless we find a way to stop it.'

He stood leaning back against the white balustrade, looking at her.

'If I can find a way to remove her from the scene can I count on you to do your part and help Gavin to forget her?'

She pressed her hands to her face but the tears escaped under her fingers.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Oh—yes—yes——'

'Don't cry,' he said gently. 'It begins to come clear to me. Gavin will be happy. But it will take time. And it will take you.'

When Kay arrived that evening Laurence and Maureen were still sitting on the balcony and Gavin was still lying on his bed. He had slept and wakened and Laurence had taken tea into him. He complained that his head still ached, and of the noises in his ears. It was one of his bad days, as he had feared it was going to be. Laurence had suggested, 'Why not write a note to Kay explaining it's one of your bad days and asking her not to come up this evening, I'll take it down to her.' But Gavin wouldn't hear of it. She was soon going back to London; there was so little time left. He would be all right when she came. It was partly nerves, he insisted, the waiting.

Kay professed great surprise at seeing Maureen.

'Why, look who's here!'

Maureen regarded her unsmilingly.

'Gavin's not well. It's one of his bad days. He needs to rest.'

'Oh, poor darling. But he has these bad days, I believe.'

Laurence said, 'Yes. This is one of them. I told him he should put you off, but unfortunately he wouldn't hear of it.'

'Bless his heart!'

'It shows devotion, yes, but I hope you'll insist on going all the same.'

Kay smiled.

'I doubt if he's as ill as all that!'

She turned to go into the house but Laurence moved to bar her way.

'Miss Carter! I don't know what you really feel about Gavin but if you have a particle of consideration you will just visit him for a few minutes as you would someone in hospital, and then go. He suffers as all deaf-blind people do with the most terrible head noises, on some days worse than others, and this is one of the worst attacks he's ever had. It's brought on by the nervous tension of waiting for you, by the general emotional stress, and by nervous and physical exhaustion.'

'For someone with no medical or nursing training you really know quite a lot, don't you, Nicky-boy?'

She smiled at the girl.

'You didn't know his real name is Nicholas, and that he's not really a nurse, did you?'

'I don't care what his real name is,' the girl cried, her face flaming with anger. 'I wish you'd go. If you had any decency you would! Put that in your filthy column!'

Kay's eyes narrowed, but she managed a laugh.

'Quite a red-haired Irish temper! Perhaps I *will* put it in my column!'

She then pushed past Laurence into the house. He did not move but he made no attempt to stop her.

He motioned to the girl.

'Let's go. We've failed, but it'll be for the last time.'

'What are you planning to do?'

'Never mind. Let's go into the town and have some drinks.'

As they walked down the hill from the house she asked him, 'Was it true what she said about you? Is your name really Nicholas?'

'Yes, Nicholas Laurence. It's also true I've had no nursing training, but I've never pretended I had.'

'Your life's a mystery, isn't it?'

'Not really. Gavin knows about it. You can ask him to tell you sometime—later on. When all this has come to seem like somebody else's bad dream. . . .'

II

A LIGHTED WINDOW in the cottage as he approached near midnight started up in Laurence an emotion that was half hope, half fear: perhaps Kay had had the decency to leave Gavin early and return to the hotel, and he had left the light on as a sign that he was alone. But as soon as he opened the front door he heard Gavin's shouting voice, though he could not distinguish the words—of which he was glad—and as soon as he entered the house he heard the woman laughing.

Minnaloushe entered the house with him and he went into the kitchen and opened a tin of cat-food for her, then went into the bathroom. He was aware that he was a little drunk and it was therefore necessary to prove to himself his self-control by being very methodical in all that he did, washing, cleaning his teeth, hanging his towel neatly over the rail. The cat sat in the doorway of the kitchen, washing herself after eating. When Laurence came out of the bathroom she followed him into his room and jumped up on the bed. As methodically as he had made his toilet he undressed, folded and hung his clothes, put out for the morning the rough clothes he wore when working outside, and got into bed. Minnaloushe moved up close to him, purring loudly and treading the woollen blanket in that inexplicable feline ecstasy.

Laurence wound his watch and switched off the bedside lamp, then lay in a confused reverie in which his thoughts pirouetted and whirled, drunkenly, in an allegorical ballet, a masque of Good and Evil, Clare as the Good Fairy, Kay as the Bad Fairy, with Maureen caste as Innocence, with himself spinning wildly with all three, neither Good nor Evil, but a lost thing, faceless, un-named. And Gavin—oh Gavin as the Prince, of course, romantic in blue

velvet doublet, with gold dust in his hair, the Eternal Poet, Eternal Youth, enamoured of the Bad Fairy, symbolically blind and deaf. . . .

Minnaloríshe concluded her treading and settled herself snugly against his shoulder. He reached out a hand and caressed the small soft head . . . and thought of Kay brushing Gavin's hair back from his forehead, and of her excited, triumphant laugh. The laugh which came again as he lay there insomniac in the listening dark.

Towards morning he dozed, and was wakened by movements in the next room and was instantly alert. He was aware that Gavin, as usual, had got up with Kay, and as usual they went into the kitchen together and made coffee; he heard the grind of the mill and smelt the good strong aroma. Presently he heard the back door open and close and knew that she had gone.

He leapt out of bed and pulled on sweater and trousers and pushed his feet into shoes. As he did so he heard Gavin groping his way through the living-room and colliding with a chair on his way back to the bedroom. He heard the closing of the bedroom door.

He let himself out of the house and scrambled down over the rough bouldery land below the balcony and dropped down on to the road before Kay had turned the corner of the lane which descended sharply to it. Then he crouched beside a gorse bush waiting to see which way she went. To his relief she went over the wall and began threading her way between boulders and gorse, heading for the cove. He straightened up and watched her until she was out of sight behind a hillock, then went over the wall himself.

He did not make his way to the cove, but moving quietly and dodging behind bushes and boulders reached the other side of the low narrow headland which curved to form the cove. He stripped off his clothes and pushed his way through a patch of sedge and stumbled into mud and weed at the other side. He kicked free of the weed, waded a few feet, then found depth and began to swim, strongly, silent.

At the point of the small headland he found a handgrip among exposed roots and holding on peered cautiously round. Kay was

floating in the clear water beyond the weed. Her body looked very white in its nakedness on the green darkness of the water.

She never saw who or what it was that dragged her down among the weed. She screamed but the sound was lost in the cries of the disturbed gulls.

IT FELL to Basil Riddling to find the body.

After breakfast that morning he had gone up to the cottage to ask if he might hire the boat for a few days for an English couple who wanted to go rowing on the lake.

He was not his usual boisterous self. He did not sing or whistle as he came up the garden path, nor indulge in any facetious bogus-Irish greeting. He greeted Laurence unsmilingly and came straight to the point about the boat.

'By all means,' Laurence said. 'The oars are in the turf shed. I'll get them for you.'

As they walked together to the shed Riddling said, 'I'm worried. Miss Carter didn't turn up for breakfast this morning. She's been swimming before breakfast the last few mornings and getting back about eight. When she hadn't shown up by nine this morning Edna went to her room, and her bed hadn't been slept in. What can you make of it? I mean where the devil could she have gone in a place like this?'

Laurence busy with extracting the oars from behind a clutter of gardening implements said without looking round, 'Perhaps she went off in a car with someone and stayed overnight.'

'But who? None of my other guests are missing. She went out after dinner for a stroll—she always did. I never noticed when she got back from these strolls. After dinner I'm always busy in the bar, or making up a foursome for bridge with some of the guests. I can't check on everyone's comings and goings. Her room key wasn't there this morning, but she often takes her key with her—a lot of them do. I hope to God nothing sensational has happened to her—I don't want that kind of publicity for the hotel bang in the

middle of the first season! And the guards around, asking questions. You'd have them up here, too.'

Laurence's mouth went dry. He bent to pick up a sod of turf and throw it to the back of the shed.

Straightening himself he said, evenly, 'I sincerely hope not. It would bring the jackals of the press sniffing around and that could focus the most frightful publicity on Gavin. The *Sunday Sensation* has run several excessively vulgar pieces about him already. One of the reasons—the chief reason—we came here was to get away from all that. But why should the guards come here?.'

'You both knew her. She spent a night here.'

'They don't need to know that. In fact they can't know it unless you tell them. For heaven's sake leave us out of it! Anyhow with any luck she'll turn up at lunchtime.'

'If she doesn't I don't know how long to wait before telephoning the *gardai*.'

Even in his anxiety he couldn't resist using the Irish word.

'You'd better 'phone in the afternoon, I imagine.'

'I suppose so. As you say, with any luck she'll turn up.'

He raised a wan smile.

'A hotel-keeper's life is not a happy one, old boy! Fare thee well!'

He shouldered the oars and marched off down the path and out on to the rough lane to the road, where he climbed the wall and trudged over the bouldery land to the lake.

When he came to the boat, tied up in the cove, placing the oars on board he saw to his astonishment a bright blue dress, white shoes and cardigan, and a flimsy pile of pink nylon which his mind registered as 'undies'. At the bottom of the boat, lying in water, was a double necklace of white beads.

He had no doubt that everything was Miss Carter's. He remembered thinking how well she looked in the blue dress with the white beads. He removed all the things from the boat and laid them on the grass, hoping wildly that their owner was somewhere about. He looked about, on the land and on the water, but could see no one. There were only the cries of gulls, and at the far end of

the lake the McManus dog barking, and smoke rising from the white blob of the house.

He untied the painter, waded into the water and scrambled aboard. He took up the anchor, smothered in green weed, and pushed the boat out. The rowlocks creaked as he rowed out of the cove and turned the boat down the lake in the direction of the hotel.

It was then, as he turned, that he saw the ash-blond head bobbing in the water. At first he thought it was Miss Carter swimming. He was about to call to her when horror leapt in him with realization.

As soon as Riddling had gone Laurence went in to Gavin. He was relieved to find him awake. The sooner what had to be said was said and the resultant situation grappled with the better. And the sooner old Riddling 'phoned the guards the better. Get it over with.

He sat down on the bed and took Gavin's hand to tell him, 'Something terrible has happened. Brace yourself for a shock.'

Gavin asked, sharply, immediately panic-stricken, 'Nothing to do with Kay?'

'She is missing.'

Gavin leapt up in the bed, crying excitedly, 'Missing? What do you mean missing?'

'Basil was up here. She hasn't been back to the hotel.'

'But where could she have gone? I don't understand. She left here at the usual time this morning. She said it was a nice warm morning and she would go for a swim before she went back, as usual.'

Suddenly he clutched Laurence.

'My God! That's it! She went swimming and something happened to her! What are we to do? What is Basil doing?'

'He will telephone the guards if she doesn't come back by lunchtime. Try to keep calm. I'll get you a sedative.'

He melted tablets in a glass of water, and Gavin swallowed it without protest.

'My head is terrible again this morning,' he said. 'Such noises all the time!'

'You need rest. I'll give you something to help you presently, but first I want you to understand that if the guards come here asking questions we haven't seen Kay since the night she stayed here. Otherwise there's going to be the most frightful scandal. All the trash papers would go to town about it and you can imagine what it would mean to the *Sunday Sensation*!'

Gavin buried his face in his hands.

'It's too awful! I can't think! If anything has happened to her I shall go mad! I'll kill myself! She was all I had to live for!'

He flung himself face down into the pillow sobbing hysterically. Laurence remained with him, a hand on his shoulder, waiting for the drug to take effect.

He had the sensation of every nerve in his own body tensed, but with this tension he had also the feeling of being cold and still inside himself. If only Riddling could resist talking about Gavin-Edwards-the-deaf-blind-poet living up the road, and bringing Miss Carter there for a night, there need be no encounter with the guards. There was completely no need to tell anyone about either, but Riddling loved to talk, to be able to impart information; he was a gift to any reporter, and the guards, being Irish, and stationed in a dull little place like Derrygimlagh, would enjoy a bit of gossip and encourage him. The only hope was that the shock of what he would probably find in the cove, or somewhere out in the lake, would dry up the fount of garrulousness.

Gavin sank into an exhausted and drugged sleep, and Laurence waited impatiently for Maureen to arrive. He swallowed a large shot of whisky, then made coffee and drank it black; he had no desire to eat. He had not long to wait, for shortly after ten Maureen arrived. She looked tired and unhappy.

'I couldn't sleep last night for worrying about things,' she told him.

He said, harshly, 'There's a lot more to worry about now. Riddling's been up here. Kay's missing. She never turned up for breakfast. Mrs. Riddling went to her room and of course found

the bed not slept in. I couldn't enlighten old Basil about that.'

Maureen stared at him, aghast. After a moment she said, slowly, a slight tremor in her voice, 'Do you know anything about her—disappearance? You said you had a plan. You said something about it last time.'

He met her horrified eyes levelly.

'Are you suggesting I've kidnapped her, or what?'

She went past him into the living-room and sank down into a chair.

'You wouldn't tell me what you had in mind. You made a mystery of it. Everything about you is a mystery. I'm so tired of it!'

She began to cry, helplessly, overcome by tiredness and general wretchedness.

'Oh, for God's sake!' he exclaimed. 'Here, I've made some coffee. It's still hot. I'll put a shot of whisky in it.'

He brought a cup and poured out black coffee then added a liberal shot of whisky.

'At this time of the morning,' she protested.

'Don't be puritanical! Drink it up. You'll need it. This is going to be a difficult day. I've broken it to Gavin that his love is missing and that the guards may be up here before the day's out, and that if we're to avoid being dragged into a lot of unpleasant publicity the less we know and say the better. With any luck she'll turn up for lunch.'

'But where could she possibly have gone? Unless—do you think perhaps she didn't feel like the usual swim when she got down to the cove and just lay down among the bracken and went to sleep?'

'Hardly. If she didn't feel like a swim she'd surely have gone straight back to the hotel and gone to bed. My guess is that she had one swim too many.'

'You mean that she got—drowned?'

'Yes. Don't look so horrified! Only yesterday you were wishing her dead—and not for the first time!'

'Oh, I know one says these things. It all seemed so horrible what she was doing to Gavin.'

'Not seemed—was. If she's dead let's be glad. There's that much evil less in the world.'

He poured himself another shot of whisky. The tight band round his head seemed to be easing.

She was silent a moment, stirring the coffee she had no heart to drink, then said, 'Was Gavin in a terrible state when you told him she was missing?'

'Yes. I gave him a sedative.'

'If you have to tell him she's dead he'll go mad.'

'Not if you help him. I wanted you here to try and get him away from that woman, as I told you. If she's dead your job is trying to convince him that it's not the end of the world—of his world.'

She said nothing and he continued, 'If the guards come here you haven't met her here. Only the time she came to your home in Killiney to interview Gavin. We've got to keep out of this, and keep Gavin out. It's a wonderful story for the *Sunday Sensation* if it gets out that she was having an affaire with him.'

He jumped up.

'Someone's coming up the path. If it's the guards don't forget—you met her only in Dublin.'

He went through the kitchen and opened the back door. A McManus boy stood there, Séan, the next in age to Michael, who had gone to England as soon as he was sixteen. Séan did odd jobs at the hotel.

'Mr. Oakes, sir, Mr. Riddling says will you come at once. 'Tis very important. Guard Sullivan is there.'

'Sure. Don't wait for me. I'll come on my bike.'

He went back to Maureen.

'It was Séan McManus. Riddling wants me. One of the guards is there. If Gavin wakes before I get back try to get him to take some warm milk with an egg whipped in it, and have some yourself. You haven't drunk your coffee. Swallow it down now, like a good girl—'

He stood by her whilst she swallowed it.

'What am I to tell Gavin if he wakes up?'

'Just that Riddling sent for me. Don't encourage him to hope for the best. Try to reconcile him to the idea of the worst.'

She looked at him but could find no words. Because her strongest emotion was something too terrible to put into words, then or ever.

At the hotel he found Basil in a very shaken condition. Not wishing to involve any of his guests in the tragic business he had waited until Guard Sullivan had arrived on his bicycle and then they had gone out together in the boat and brought the body of the drowned woman in. He would not have thought it possible that an attractive woman could be so terribly changed after a few hours of death in the water. He tried not to think of it but he had the feeling of it having been photographed on to his brain. Edna, who had served in an ambulance unit in London's Civil Defence during the war decided—rightly—that he was suffering from shock and made him some strong tea with a quantity of sugar in it. He tried to drink it but vomited it almost immediately. After that he stuck to brandy, of which he had had a good deal when Laurence arrived.

Guard Sullivan was a big ponderous red-faced man totally unused to dealing with anything but the plain business of intervention in fights between men who had the drink taken on a Fair day, or keeping a watch out for poaching in the lake in season, though he was inclined to turn a blind eye when it was anyone he liked—or preferred not to offend. He led a peaceful, lazy existence with his wife and ten children in a flat over the guards' barracks, and the removal of a drowned woman—stark naked at that—out of the lake was an upset, not to say an embarrassment, he had never expected to have to face. Self-importance and inadequacy conflicted in him.

The interview took place in the Riddlings' private sitting-room. Kay's body had been collected by the ambulance of Derrygimlagh's small hospital run by nuns, Mr. Riddling having formally identified her as the lady who had registered in his hotel ten days ago as Miss Kay Carter, journalist, from London. He had also identified the dress found in the boat when it was tied up in the cove as the one she had worn in his hotel when he had last seen her alive. Guard Sullivan understood that the said boat was the property of

Mr. Laurence Oakes. Laurence replied that it was. And had Mr. Oakes ever seen Miss Carter swimming in the lake? Mr. Oakes replied that he had done so a few times, but not that morning, as his blind friend was not well and he had been fully occupied looking after him.

'Would ye be knowin' her at all?'

'I met her once in London at a television studio. My friend had been in the programme and she was anxious to interview him for her newspaper. I never saw her again until she turned up here.'

'Were ye friendly with her here?'

'Ah, no. She was annoyed with me that time in London. I stopped and spoke when I met her in the road soon after she arrived here, but I don't think she'd have remembered me if I hadn't spoken first. I saw her several times along the road after that, and from a distance when she was having her early morning swims.'

Guard Sullivan concluded his notes, closed his notebook and replaced the elastic band round it, and observed that Mr. Riddling would be notified the date of the inquest. Deceased's father would be coming out from England to identify the body as that of his daughter. It was a terrible thing to have happened in this peaceful part of the world; a terrible tragedy.

Basil came to life to ask, wanly, 'How do you suppose it happened?'

'Rulin' out foul play,' said Guard Sullivan, importantly, 'wouldn't there be a number of ways a person swimmin' might come to grief? I'm not a swimmer meself, but couldn't the cramps be seizin' up yer limbs? Or the floatin' weed entanglin' yer feet?'

'I suppose so. It beats me that anyone would want to swim in that icy water. May I offer you a little refreshment? Stout? Whisky? And you, Laurie, old boy?'

Guard Sullivan replied that he never took a drop when on duty and that he must be getting back. Laurence said he would take a whisky, and asked, 'Will I be needed at the inquest?'

'Ah, no. Only himself. I'll be going along. Goodbye now.'

Basil brought Laurence the whisky then sank into a chair.

'I'm shattered, old boy. Shattered. I keepin' seeing her how

she was when we fished her out of the water. Ghastly! Absolutely ghastly!

Edna looked appealingly at Laurence.

'I keep telling him he's had the most frightful shock and that he should go and lie down and let me 'phone Dr. Casey to come and give him a shot of something. You're a trained nurse, Mr. Oakes. Don't you agree?'

'I do entirely. And if any reporter comes out send him packing. I must get back, Gavin's not at all well. As soon as he's feeling better I want to take him to his grandparents at Killiney.'

'Shall you tell him about all this?'

'I don't think so. After all she was nothing to him. . . .'

Maureen was still beside Gavin's bed when he got back.

'He hasn't stirred,' she told him. 'How did you get on?'

'It was all right. I won't be wanted at the inquest. I've no evidence to offer. Riddling said nothing about her having spent a night here. As long as he keeps quiet about it at the inquest Gavin won't be involved. But I'd like for us to go back to Killiney with you in a day or two. Would that be feasible? It would be better for Gavin to get away from here, with all its associations.'

'What are we to tell them there?'

'The minimum. That the horrible woman reporter who came out to the house pestering about Gavin has been found drowned here, and that Gavin has been shocked and upset by the news as he had liked her when she visited him in Devon, not realizing what she was like. I can explain that since his disablement he has been easily upset and thrown off-balance, and that he hadn't been very well anyhow. Perhaps you would telephone them?'

Maureen agreed, and asked, 'What are you going to tell him when he wakes up?'

'The truth. That she was found drowned, by old Basil, that Guard Sullivan has been up, and that nothing has been said about her ever being here. We'll have a fresh bout of hysteria to cope with, but that nobody can cry for ever is central to my philosophy. And he fortunately has you to help him. A shoulder to weep on.'

'It's all so terrible and you sound so hard and cynical!'

‘Do you expect me to weep crocodile tears for Kay Carter of the *Sunday Sensation*? It’s a wonderful bit of sensationalism for them, of course. It’s just too bad they don’t know the deaf-blind boy-poet’s in the vicinity so that they can whoop it up to real yellow-press dimensions! All the same I’d prefer to be gone before they get here....’

GAVIN's reaction to the news that Kay had been found drowned in the lake was the common reaction to news of unexpected death—that it couldn't be true, of the whole being resisting the idea, shouting No, in a wild, fearful incredulity: it must be a mistake. Then in the slow anguish of realization the overwhelming sense of desertion, of the other person having gone, without saying goodbye, without warning, in a terrible finality. Then the wild weeping, the exhaustion, the numbness, and the bottomless despair.

He was glad to go from the cottage. It should be sold lock, stock, and barrel, he declared. They would take their few personal possessions with them, and Minnaloushe, and never return. How could anyone believe there was any order or meaning in life? He had had to wait three years to meet Kay again, and then she had found him in this remote place by sheer chance—and at the end of ten days had been taken away from him for ever, and that, too, by the sheerest chance, for if she had not gone swimming that morning the tragedy would never have happened. Or would it have happened in the same way another day? One guess was as good as another in the whole crazy-patchwork pattern of things.

He reverted to the idea he had had in the spring, that his life was quite pointless and futile and that he might as well die. It was to Maureen he turned for comfort. Laurence had always hated Kay, he said, bitterly, and would be glad she was dead, and she lacked both the courage and the heart to tell him that she also had hated her, wishing her dead. She longed to be able to comfort him, out of her aching pity, but instinct told her that her arms about him when he wept and her hand clasping his when he came to the

edge of the abyss did more for him than words ever could. Gavin was drawn to her as the only person he could talk to, feeling estranged from Laurence. He was grateful to her for not trying to say the usual trite consolatory and sensible things; and he was grateful for her mere presence, for the gentle love and tenderness that flowed out to him through her hands.

He wrote to his mother that Maureen had been with them for a few days and they were all three leaving next day for the Villa Napoli. 'Neither Laurie nor I want to return to the cottage,' he wrote. 'We both feel that there is no longer any point—if indeed there ever was any!—in our being isolated here. I have not been very well this last week and feel the need of a change. I don't know what should happen next and I don't think Laurie does, either. He is writing you himself. I haven't written any poetry for ages. I feel dead inside myself.'

Laurence wrote briefly: 'I agree with Gavin that life has come to an end here, and admit that I don't know what should happen next. Gavin has been very depressed lately and has been having the old pains in his head and ears again, due I think to nervous tensions. Kay Carter turned up here on holiday, with no idea we were here and two days ago was found drowned in the lake. You may have read of it in the press. Fortunately Gavin's name has been kept out of it or it would have been a wonderful scoop for the *Sunday Sensation*. But I am glad we are leaving here before the inquest is held and the local press comes snooping around. The tragedy has upset Gavin a good deal and is another reason for leaving here for good. After Gavin has had a few weeks' rest at the Villa Napoli it should be possible to make plans.'

Vivien wrote to Laurence at the Villa Napoli wondering whether 'a small flat in London would be the answer. Then Gavin could be visited by some of the people he likes—his publisher, and the Berrings, and Hugh Ross, and of course dear Clare Williams, and you could do hospital work again and visiting deaf-blind people, and it would be a less restricted life for you too. Would you like me to come over and discuss it with you both?'

Laurence waited a few days before replying, then wrote that it was better not to come until Gavin was more settled down; he

was already, after a week, very much better, both mentally and physically, and had been riding with Maureen; he had even written a poem, which was always a good sign, but although there had been progress he felt that the time for upheavals and making decisions had not yet come.

Gavin was not much interested in the letter from his mother. It came the same day as the papers reported the inquest on Kay. A verdict of accidental death was returned and the coroner recommended that notices be erected beside Derrygimlagh lake warning people of the danger of swimming in it. A local reporter chatting with one of the hotel guests, in the effort to get information about Miss Carter, discovered that Gavin Edwards, a 'deaf-blind poet apparently known to some extent in England', was living up the road, but did not connect it with the Kay Carter story. It provided a news item for the paper, a paragraph, no more, for when he went up to the 'white-washed cottage on rising ground above the lake', he discovered that the place was shut up. From local people he learned that the poet and his friend had left some days ago for Dublin and would not be returning.

Basil sent a copy of the paper to Laurence to set his mind at rest as to what had been reported. He was intensely relieved that it was all over, he wrote. He had found the inquest a great strain. The poor girl's father had come out, his expenses paid by the *Sunday Sensation*, a good working-class type with a north-country accent you could have cut with a knife. He was obviously in a bad way, poor chap; it had all been very upsetting. He wouldn't take Kay's suitcase and clothes back to England, only a few small keepsakes for himself and his wife; he was sure there were plenty of people in the district who would be glad of the clothes.

'Rumour has it,' he continued, 'that you and the young man aren't returning and that the cottage is to be put up for auction, with the contents. If so I shall try to acquire it. It after all rightfully belongs to the Castle and could form a useful annexe . . .'

Laurence gave Gavin the inquest verdict but not the whole of Riddling's letter. The reference to the clothes, he felt, could only be distressing. He told him that the *Sunday Sensation* had devoted a great deal of space to Kay, running several glamorous photographs

of her and the story of her career. It had also raked up her marriage and divorce, but when he came to Braille the article he omitted this. Even so, the accumulated effect of the inquest report, Riddling's letter, and the *Sunday Sensation* article disturbed and depressed Gavin and he went off alone to the beach below the garden and lay face downwards on the shingle in the grip once again of black despair. Laurence, finding him there, went back to the house for Maureen.

'I'm no good to him any more,' he told her. 'Only you can help him now.'

That night Gavin told Laurence, 'I made love to Maureen on the beach this afternoon. I felt fed-up and desperate. She was very sweet, but she wouldn't let me go all the way. She said people who felt that way about each other should get married. I said all right, let's get married then. But she said you couldn't get married like that, as casually as buying a drink. I asked, Well, how should people get married then? She said it was too difficult to tell me on hand and when we got back to the house she would give it to me on the Arcaid. So we had a session at that and she said on it that marriage wasn't just a licence to sleep together and that she wasn't prepared to be just a substitute for Kay. It made me mad and I ripped the tape out and threw it away. I don't know what happened after that. I think she must have gone out of the room without letting me know for when I'd finished calling her a prig and saying if she didn't look out she'd find herself on the shelf the hand that took mine wasn't hers but my grandmother's, telling me tea was ready on the terrace. So now Grandma knows what I think of her darling Maureen and what sort of brute her frightful grandson is! But if Maureen weren't such a little prig and would behave naturally I *would* fall in love with her!'

Laurence told him, 'Women like Maureen have to be wooed.'

'Oh Lord! A kind of probationary period! For how long, for God's sake?'

'For as long as it takes. You've been spoilt!'

'You're never on my side these days!'

Laurence's lips compressed. He pressed Gavin's hand then fetched sleeping tablets and a glass of water.

When the glass was put into his hand Gavin said bitterly, 'It's all you've got to offer these days, isn't it? Drugs!'

He dived angrily beneath the bed-clothes. Laurence sat for a long time, his head in his hands, his mind saying in anguish to Gavin what must never be said:

In the beginning it was you who were afraid of being left; it was you who urged we should remain together till death itself parted us. But death has parted us. Not mine or yours, but the death I contrived to set you free. But it's my death too. You can't commit murder and live, whatever the Homicide Act may have to say about it. It was the agreement: till death do us part. I'll anyhow have kept my share in it.

Gavin wakened late in the morning and with a sense of something wrong. Then he remembered: he had quarrelled with his two best friends, with Maureen in the afternoon, with Laurence at night. He rolled over in the bed in an access of despair.

Why did you have to die, Kay? Paris for Christmas, you said, and then Paris in the spring. I would smell it, even though I couldn't see it. The smell of French cigarettes and coffee and garlic and drains, you said. It would all have been so wonderful. *My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?* I always found that line so very moving; I never knew that before I'd gone far I would be crying it for myself! How will I ever get you out of my blood, my beautiful drowned Kay? If ever I make love to anyone else it will always be you. And Maureen knows it. But what can I do? What can I do?

He groped for his watch on the bedside table. It was midday. He got up and went over to the window and opened it wide. He felt the sun on his face and there was a wind with the smell of sea on it. The sea would be very blue, sparkling in the morning sunshine. There were probably a few sailing-boats out, scudding before the wind. Maureen and Laurie had probably gone down to the beach for a swim before lunch. He would go and join them, make his peace with them. He turned away from the window and groped for the chair on which his clothes hung. Then an astonishing thing happened. A hand closed over his, arms went round his neck, pulling his head down—to a face, to a mouth that fastened

on his. Incredibly it was Maureen. Then her head was against his chest and his face buried in the riot of her hair, whilst she took his left hand to tell him, 'I was so unhappy last night. I couldn't sleep. If you still want it we can be married and I will make you forget the other one. I love you.'

The speaking fingers ceased. His hand closed on them and raised them to his lips.

'I wish I could see you!' he cried. 'I wish so desperately I could see you, my darling, darling Maureen! Are you smiling? Press my hand if you are!'

She pressed his hand, but when he bent his head to her face again he tasted her tears with the kiss.

'You mustn't cry, my love. We're going to be so happy. We'll live here, won't we, the place that's home for us both, and this will be our room, won't it? My room, where I so often lay and dreamed of you, and longed for you—last night, oh last night more than ever! Now you're really mine, and I'll never be alone again in the darkness. Say "I love you" and let me feel it with my fingers on your lips. Say it very clearly . . .'

In the silence whilst she enunciated it for Gavin to lip-read by touch. Laurence tried the handle of the door, found it locked and went away again, feeling the relief of surfacing after swimming too long under water.

LAURENCE wrote to Gavin:

My dear Gavin,

I sent Maureen a telegram to the hospital this morning congratulating her on the wonderful news. I am glad the child is a boy as that's what you both wanted. I have been impatient for the event because I want to go away—right away, and for good—but had the irrational desire to have your news first. Now I can feel free to go; Maureen is safely delivered and all is well. My part in your life was finished when you married, of course; I should have gone then, but it took a little time to reach the decision, and then you wrote that Maureen was expecting a child, and I had the feeling that I should wait, just in case anything went wrong and you might need me again.

I know it was hard for you both to forgive me for not coming to your wedding, and that I didn't was open to misconstruction, but a marriage between cousins is so very much a family affair and I felt myself so very much an outsider. You must believe, both of you, that there was nothing more to it than that, but that to me was important.

I have hated this year alone in London and but for Clare could hardly have endured it. I will be posting this letter on my way to see her—for the last time. Then I am taking the midnight train to Devon. The good old midnight, you used to call it. Remember? But of course you do. But just as lovers have to ask each other 'do you love me?' when they know quite well, so I have to seek this reassurance of you—though I cannot stay for an answer. The trip to Devon is a Sentimental Journey,

dedicated to remembrance. It was the happy time, and for you the creative time. But I can no longer serve any useful purpose in your life, you to whom all my life was dedicated, so it is time to go.

Remember me. Yes, I would like that—if I knew anything about it, which I won't. But it's a nice idea. Go on living creatively—in every sense. It's what you were born for.

Don't try to find me, and don't be sad. That Humbert Wolfe poem we both liked so much, *The High Song*, and the line, 'There was a thing to do, And it is done now. The high song is over.' That is how it is for me. But not for you, oh, not for you! For you the dayspring from on high, and I am glad for you. I loved you.

Laurie.

'I HAD to see you tonight,' Laurence told Clare, 'because I'm going away and not coming back.'

'Don't tell me you're emigrating to Australia, or something.'

'Or something. The point of no return and all that.'

She smiled.

'I'm afraid that's too existentialist for me. Shall I make some coffee?'

'Not unless you want it yourself. I've brought a bottle of Irish. And these for you. I saw them in a florists' window and was reminded of Gavin's twenty-first birthday party when you wore one on a black suit and looked wonderful.'

He placed a wrapped bottle and a small tissue-papered package on the table.

Clare opened the package to find two gardenias lying on a wad of cotton wool. The strong spicy scent was like incense in the small room. She exclaimed, delightedly.

'How wonderful! It's years since anyone gave me gardenias. My husband used to, on anniversaries.'

'Wear them,' he urged.

'On this old tweed suit?'

'Perhaps you could change into the black one?'

She laughed, slightly embarrassed.

'If you'd really like me to—'

'I would—very much. I'll deal with the bottle whilst you're doing it.'

She went out and returned in a few minutes wearing the black suit, with the gardenias pinned to the lapel. She had brushed her hair and deepened her lipstick and was smiling, pleased with what

the mirror showed her, she who so seldom indulged in feminine vanities.

He regarded her with frank admiration.

'You look wonderful,' he said. 'Thank you for doing it. I found glasses in the cupboard and I've poured us both doubles. O.K.? I seem to remember you take it neat.'

'Neat is all right.'

'You said that once before—at Redlands. Remember?'

'I remember the occasion. You told me a story illustrating the impossibility of escaping one's destiny—Fate, or whatever you like to call it.'

'Yes. Would you mind sitting over there by the lamp, so that I can see you? Then if we can have the other lights off . . . That's better. Now there's only you.'

She laughed and moved to the chair by the lamp, protesting that she was too old for such treatment.

He retorted, 'You're too intelligent for such false modesty.'

'I'm sorry, but I'm tired, and truly I feel old. Let's drink to Gavin's son!'

They drank, and she added, 'He wants me to be godmother!'

'Are you going to? D'you go for all that?'

'Not particularly, but it does no harm, and when what is harmless makes people happy why not indulge it? Also Gavin's mother likes the idea.'

'Poor old Vivien! I suppose she's thrilled to bits?'

'She's pleased, yes.'

'You bet she is! Everything has shaped very nicely so far as she's concerned.'

'Have you seen her since you got back to London?'

'Oh lord, no! I was never more than an employee, to be struck off the agenda when the employment ceased. There's a mutual lack of interest. She must have been as relieved as hell when I refused to go to the wedding.'

He offered her a cigarette from a gold case.

She exclaimed, as she took it, 'What a wonderful case!'

'Isn't it? It's Sir James Hayton's.'

'You mean he gave it to you?'

'I mean I stole it. It's one of the things the Haytons lost in their recent burglary. All fully insured, of course.'

He held a gold lighter for her.

'This is his too. One of several. I shall leave both on the train when I reach Devon early tomorrow morning and I hope whoever finds them will stick to them, but people are quite morbidly honest when they find valuables lying about—things a good professional burglar has to work hard to come by—so they'll probably find their way back to his nibs via the police, our most sacred national institution.'

He crossed himself, and she frowned.

'I'm too tired, Laurence. I wish you'd explain.'

'It's what I came here to do. To use you as my confessor, and I'm in deadly earnest.'

'Why do you have to confess to me?'

'For Gavin's sake. I'm disappearing and he's going to be bewildered and upset. He's going to come to you, and if you know everything you will know the right things to say. He knows I'm an old lag, in and out of prison all my life, and why, but it doesn't matter to him. All he could think of when I told him was that I'd been a good friend to him and what a lark it was that his mother and the Boss, as he calls old Hayton, had taken on a criminal unawares! I had to tell him before that bitch Kay Carter got in with it—she'd checked on me and got the full gen. I came near to telling you that night at Redlands, but shied away from it. An endemic mistrust of women. After Gavin's birthday party I sat up all night unburdening to a young tart. She fell asleep, poor girl, but she was a human being, someone to talk to, and I had no one, and sometimes it's easier to talk to people who aren't listening. Various things worked in me that night. For one thing I faced for the first time the realization of the exact nature of my love for Gavin.'

He waited for her comment and after a moment she said in a low voice, 'I didn't suspect you were queer.'

'The queer thing is I'm not! I've never been attracted to my own sex—not even in prison. I've occasionally found girl tarts attractive and gone with them. Nevertheless I was in love with Gavin.'

'It's a matter of definition, isn't it?'

'Yes, but there's no need here to define our terms. We know what we mean.'

She made no comment, and he continued, 'I had this notion of expiation through service, but it didn't work out, because I reached the point at which I wanted to be with Gavin for my own sake, not for his. When it was I who would be lost if we parted. But we did part, and I was lost. I would never have thought it possible to have missed anyone as I missed Gavin. I understand what people mean now when death robs them of someone close to them and they say it leaves them only half a person. Gavin's alive and happy, and I wanted him to marry Maureen—I almost willed it to happen—and I knew when it did that it would be the end of our life together, that my part in his life would come to an end. I knew all that intellectually, but when it happened I was left mutilated—as we say nowadays, I couldn't take it!'

He drained his glass and poured another large tot.

She said, after a moment, 'Why did you rob the Haytons?'

'I haven't had a job since I got back to London. I didn't tell you because you'd want to know how I was living and would try to get me a job. It was easier to tell you a few glib lies. It's too late now to ask you to forgive me.'

She stubbed out the end of her cigarette.

'I hate lies,' she said, quietly.

'They're sometimes handy. Anyhow you're getting the truth now—some of it, at least. I could have got another hospital job, I suppose, without too much difficulty, but I had no heart for it. I was in a curious emotional state. I felt lost and adrift—more of an outsider than I'd ever been, and that's saying something, for I was born that way. The wonderful ideal of a life dedicated to selfless service hadn't come off—I don't know why I should ever have thought it would have. A clear case of getting ideas above my spiritual station. I reverted to my nihilistic attitude.'

She interrupted him to ask, 'Why did you go on visiting deaf-blind people, then?'

'It was the one thing left to me—something I could do. Something out of the general run of things. You always said I was a good Braille teacher and manual speaker.'

'You're one of the best I ever met.'

'Thanks.'

He recharged her glass and continued: 'Going on with that gave me a certain hold on life. Without it I'd have been washed away completely. I ran through my money fairly fast—drink is expensive. Then I did a few jobs—burglaries, I mean—and got away with them. The Hayton job was my last. I decided on that because it was a house I knew, having stayed in it, and what was in it and where to find it. I also knew who I was robbing, and I'd always rather not rob the deserving well-to-do—there are a few people who've got there by their own hard work, exploiting no one—a few successful writers and actors; people like that. But I've no compunction about robbing the James Haytons of this world—I regard it merely as taking back a small part of what was stolen in the first place—from the people whose labour produced the profits. But I took a chance with that job. The police are smarter than they're generally given credit for. They could easily catch up on me—if I stayed around, which is another reason for clearing out, beyond their reach. If they catch up with me it would be fourteen years p.d. this time, and there's no remission on p.d. I couldn't face it.'

'What makes you think the police could catch up on you?'

'Because Kay Carter stirred up some mud. Because I wouldn't play ball with her over Gavin for her revolting column she made up her mind I was a mystery man, and said so, in print. Then she did a bit of investigating and discovered that Laurence Oakes is an assumed name. That my real name is Nicholas Lawrence, and that I have a police dossier a mile long. She'd hardly have kept that bit of information to herself. It would add an item to the dossier—"living under the name of Laurence Oakes". A name already connected with Gavin Edwards. When Gavin married, the *Sunday Sensation* sent a reporter out to cover the event. He asked to meet me and was told I had gone to London. The police had nothing on me then, but the raid on the London house of Gavin Edwards' step-father should set them thinking. They'll be on the lookout for me, and with this scar I'm easily identified. Any day now there will appear in the press a short paragraph: The police are anxious to

interview a man calling himself Laurence Oakes, whom they believe may be able to help them with their inquiries into the recent burglary at the London house of Sir James Hayton. If they get their interview the game's up, so I'm leaving London tonight. The news of the birth of Gavin's son was the signal that it was time to go. But I wanted to hold out till the news came. Like that story of the goat on the mountain side holding out against the waiting wolf until the morning star should reveal itself.'

He drained his glass, then added, 'The dawn broke for Gavin with his marriage. Now it's about to break for me.'

He glanced at his watch.

'It's nearly time to get going. Will you have a last drink with me?'

'All right. But one thing—why are you going to Devon? I mean granted it's best to leave London, why Devon? Ireland would have been safer.'

'Ireland belongs to Gavin. It never meant very much to me. I liked its physical beauty, and the silence, but it was the beginning of estrangement for Gavin and me. He was restless and unhappy there. There was no peace there for us. But in that hilltop house in Devon we were happy—until the outside world intruded. I have the sentimental desire to walk into the little town and down to the harbour before people are awake. Standing there at the mouth of the estuary you can look across to the hills behind the village of Shaldon, and you can see the little house, looking one way over to Dartmoor, in the West, and the other way out to sea. The morning star should still be shining over the sea when I arrive.'

He drained his glass and got up.

'There's just one more thing, and I must ask you to believe me. Even if I weren't lost, even if I hadn't done the Hayton job and hadn't the feeling that the police were looking for me, I'd still have to go, now that I have the signal. I have a continual nightmare in which I am swimming under water and can't surface, because something, someone, is dragging me down. Night after night I die this death and I can't live with it any longer. It's my particular heart of darkness. You can't commit murder and live. People do

all the time, but there's the death inside yourself. For me, anyhow. The necessity for the final act of expiation.'

'Murder? Have you really committed murder?'

'Yes. Without regret. I destroyed evil.'

She covered her eyes with her hand.

'We can't take the law into our hands like that——'

'Not even when the evil threatens to destroy someone you love?'

'Oh, no! No! We dare not assume the responsibility! Expiation—how can you ever expiate the deliberate destruction of a human life, however evil?'

'In wars thousands of human lives are deliberately destroyed and the men who give the orders and the men who drop the bombs feel themselves justified. No one bothers to inquire whether these human lives are evil, unfit to live.'

'In war they're the enemy—regarded as collectively' evil. I find it horrible and morally wrong, but it has a certain logic—once you accept the arbitrament of war. But the murder of an individual by an individual——'

He cut in on her roughly: 'That's worse than killing women and children and people in hospital with atomic bombs—or leaving them to live on a few years with cancer of the blood?'

She forced herself to look at him.

'If you have no regrets why the act of expiation?'

'I told you. The death inside oneself. A rational deed can have emotional complications. Mine had. The long nightmare I told you of. I'm at the end of the road anyhow.'

She was silent for a moment, then said, 'Nicholas, what are you planning?'

'You called me Nicholas——'

'It's your name, you said.'

'It's my name, yes, and it's right you should use it now, when we're dealing with truth. What I'm planning is to take a last look at the place in which I was last happy, then disappear.'

'You wouldn't like to be more explicit?'

'Dear Clare! It wouldn't help. Would you like to come to Paddington and see me off? It would hide my scar if you walked on

my right side. I've never been seen off in my life. I'd like the experience.'

'Yes, I'll come.'

She got up, and a scent of gardenias seemed to ~~him~~ to vibrate on the air with her movements.

'I'm worried about you,' she said.

'There's no need to be. Now of all times there's no need. If only I can get on to the train without being picked up.' *If only I can hold out till morning.*

They went out and down the stairs and into the empty street, sultry with the warmth of the June night. They went down a side turning into a main street and found a taxi. In the taxi on the short ride to Paddington he took her hand, but they neither of them spoke. There was a thing to say, and it was said now.

At the station, whilst he was buying the ticket, she suddenly realized he had no suitcase or handgrip.

She asked, 'Did you leave a suitcase in the cloakroom?'

'No. I've no luggage. I don't need any.'

She gripped his arm then and called him by the name by which she had always called him.

'Laurie, what are you up to? Are you planning to—do away with yourself?'

He smiled down at her in the gloom of the booking-hall.

'To do away with oneself—like doing away with something unwanted in a garden. It's a good phrase. I intend to disappear. Can't we leave it at that?'

They left the booking-hall and came out on to the platform at which the train waited. There was only ten minutes to go and the train was fairly full. They walked almost its length, past the sleeping-car coaches, looking for an empty compartment. They found one in which the centre light had not been switched on. Laurence got in, drew the blinds over the door on the corridor side, then leaned out to speak to Clare waiting on the platform.

'When you see Gavin again tell him that you saw me off and that I was glad to be going, and give him my love.'

'I will, of course, but are you sure that what you call the final act of expiation isn't the final act of selfishness?'

'As you would say, it's a matter of definition. See Gavin sometimes, won't you? He is very devoted to you.'

'He's devoted to you, too. He'll be heartbroken.'

'Not really. There was a time when he needed me, that's all. You said in the beginning, the day you brought me to meet Gavin, that perhaps he was what I had been looking for, which of course he was. Thank you for everything.'

Doors slammed, a whistle blew.

'Live!' she cried, desperately. 'Please live!'

'Stand away there, please!' a porter shouted, angrily.

She stood back, wheels turned and the train began to move, slowly, but gathering speed.

'Live!' she cried again, but he could no longer hear her, and smoke swirled down suddenly, shutting them off from each other.

HE WAS the only person to alight at Teignmouth station. The ticket collector wished him good morning, pleasantly, and when he came out into the station yard he saw that it had rained in the night, heavily. The early morning air was cold with the rain on it. He turned up his coat collar and set off down the station road. A milkman was leaving bottles of milk in doorways. Gulls wheeled screaming over roof-tops. There was the strong seaweedy smell of the sea. The clock on the clocktower at the bottom of the road recorded six-ten. Automatically he checked his watch. The train had been dead on time.

He turned left and walked to the promenade. The tide was high and the sea rough, rolling in in long foaming breakers and dashing itself against the red cliffs and throwing up fountains of spray. He liked a rough sea and stood for some minutes watching it. *'The beautiful, lapsing, unsoilable sea.'* He recalled the June day in Regent's Park when the idea of living together, somewhere by the sea, had first begun to take shape, Gavin's excitement, and the stirring of something strange and new in himself, and the line coming into his mind. He watched the waves now, fascinated, and almost turned to take Gavin's hand to describe them to him, and the suck of the waves pounding the beach and raking the shingle. He walked to the end of the promenade then cut through narrow back streets to the harbour and looked across the estuary to the undulating line of the hills behind Shaldon. His gaze travelled along the ridge and came to rest at the white blob he knew to be Redlands, because of its belt of trees not easily distinguishable. He wondered who lived there now and whether the mimosa tree he had planted experimentally in a sheltered sunny corner by the conservatory had resisted the gales.

Those were the good days, with the summer evening walks along the lane behind the house, with the scent of honeysuckle and hayfields and meadowsweet, and Gavin coming near to happiness. If Kay Carter hadn't found a way in through the hedge that serenity might have endured and the whole story have been different. But she had found a way in. The serpent always does.

He left the harbour and followed the road up behind the houses to the long bridge across the estuary. At the bridge he paused again to look at Redlands, more distinct now than from the harbour. But crossing the bridge he looked the other way, to the sea. There was a heavy swell at the bar, but the tide was on the turn.

He followed the road below the red cliffs and when it terminated went on over scattered rocks and boulders, turning the corner of the overhanging cliffs. Later in the day there would be holidaymakers scrambling over the rocks with their towels and swimsuits, staking out their morning's claim on the patches of sand and shingle, camping out with their transistor sets in the series of small coves, but by that time he would have gone.

He found a sheltered cove which the sun had reached and sat down with his back to the cliff wall. He took out the gold cigarette case and lighter and lit a cigarette. He had never intended leaving these things on the train, but he had not wanted to tell Clara where he did intend to leave them, and where they would be found as surely as on a train.

The sea was empty of shipping and the Teignmouth beaches and promenade of human life. The long churning white lines of waves in endless advance and retreat, and the wheeling and diving gulls with their cries alternately fretful and mocking, alone lived and moved and had their being. The unsoilable sea. No matter how much filth was emptied into it it remained shining and splendid. The waves were going down now, on the ebb tide, pounding less violently on the rocks, but it was still a heavy sea—for swimmers only, and strong at that. Well, this was going to be quite a swim.

Had Clare really believed he had committed murder? And if so did she connect it with the death of Kay Carter? If, knowing

him for a liar, she had not believed him it was perhaps better. It had seemed too much to put upon her the burden of the whole truth—in which she would have been bound to believe. He had at least acknowledged his guilt, admitted the intolerable burden of it on his conscience. Yet was conscience the word? Kay Carter dead was just that much less evil in a world that was surely bound and delivered over to evil, in all its forms. Every day people were cold-bloodedly murdered by their fellow men, shot or hanged, with or without benefit of trials, in the name of the law, or in rough justice. Dictators ordered the executions and went off to lunch; and the men who carried out the orders, who knotted the noose or formed the firing party, counted it all in the day's work and went home to their wives, fondled their children, stroked the cat, good men and true, disposing of evil as they were bid and theirs not to reason why. It happened all the time, in war and in the armed truce which had come to be accepted as peace. But dispose of evil on your initiative you must not. It was shocking because it was against the social and moral code, and against the law. But, obversely, when men came face to face with the enemy in war they were sometimes unnerved, unable to pull the trigger, throw the hand grenade, plunge the bayonet into the living guts as they had been trained; they failed to recognize evil, seeing only a boy in a soldier's uniform, or a family man like themselves, with tired lines under his eyes. The enemy is not necessarily evil; but evil is always the enemy, the destroyer.

No, conscience didn't come into it; it was true as he had told Clare, he had no regrets. What he had not told her, he reflected, and what would have helped her to understand, was that he was no stranger to violence; he had struck that bloody R.S.M. with intent to kill. What he was stranger to was the love and tenderness, the passion of caring, a deaf-blind young poet had evoked in him. For that he had been prepared to kill if need be, and to die. And he had killed, and he was glad to die.

He lit another cigarette from the stub of the first and his thoughts flowed on. Was this really, as he had told Clare, a final act of expiation? was expiation impossible without repentance, as she had declared? But he did not acknowledge that that particular

—that supreme—act of violence was sin, so there was nothing to repent. He had destroyed evil on his own initiative and without remorse. But though conscience didn't come into it horror did. Night after night, even in drugged sleep, the underwater nightmare, the thresh of a white naked body, like a hooked fish, and himself dragged down among the weeds, and the hideous wakening to drowning screams that were his own.

Was it no more than the desire to put an end to the nightmare which had brought him in loneliness to this lonely shore? Or something even less—inability to face the fourteen-year stretch of preventive detention which awaited him if the police caught up with him for criminal deeds so much less than the cause of the nightmare that comparison was ludicrous? Could he face that—even without the nightmare? Could he learn to live with the nightmare if he were secure from this other dread? He didn't know. He only knew that the combination of the two created a death-in-life condition that was completely unacceptable, so that death itself was to be preferred. He had held on until he should be free to give himself up, make the final surrender—to whatever there was, if anything, the other side of life.

He pressed the end of his cigarette into the sand. There were a good many things wrong with life, but what was wrong with death? Nothing; particularly when life itself held nothing. And it was an eminently peaceful condition.

He got up, with the cigarette case and lighter in his hand; where to leave them, beyond reach of the tide and where they could not fail to be seen? He selected a rock and was walking towards it when it came to him that if these things were found and handed to the police—and people were sometimes absurdly honest—they would provide a clue which would link him with the Hayton robbery—a clue in confirmation of suspicions the police probably already had and were working on; a clue even to his disappearance. For why should these Hayton possessions be found here at this part of the coast where he had lived with Gavin? He had been a fool not to leave them on the train. If the things were handed in the press would have the story and someone would be sure to tell Gavin. From thinking it strange that his stepfather's

stolen possessions should be found at that particular part of the coast he would brood and speculate until suspicion became certainty. His arriving at the right conclusion as to who did the robbery was unimportant, not anything he would mind, but his suspicions and conclusions would not end there but connect with the farewell letter. And it was better not; better to disappear, leaving no trace. With any luck in that sea and on an outgoing tide his body would never be found—or anyhow not until it was unidentifiable.

He put the case and lighter into his trousers hip pocket, then removed his jacket, shoes and socks and carried them over to the corner of the cove where there had been a fall of stone and rubble from the cliff face and buried them there. He thought it unlikely they would ever be discovered, unless an exceptionally high tide should one day reach that far and wash them out from under the debris, but he had left no clue in the pockets of the jacket. But with the case and lighter he was taking no chances; when he had swum far enough out, assuming he would be able to swim at all in that sea, he would drop them, the handsome, valuable, futile things—unless the waves relieved him of any necessity to do so.

He walked to the edge of the sea and stood a few moments looking at it, watching the long curling lines of the waves forming and breaking, one upon another, endlessly, tossing up spray which caught the sunlight and collapsed in cascades of diamonds. So often he had described the sea off this stretch of coast to Gavin, and when he had been able to tell him it was rough or choppy the boy had been glad, declaring that he liked it that way, that a sea should rattle about. . . .

Well, this sea was certainly rattling about. More than somewhat. Perhaps it was doing the same in Killiney Bay, though this morning Gavin would be more interested in his day-old son than in what the sea was doing—or the friend he had known as Laurence Oakes. He smiled at the thought and still smiling walked in among the wild white horses.

They leapt about him and eventually bowled him over. He began to swim, and though the waves buffeted him and continually submerged him and tried to drown him, the tide bore him

outwards towards the sun and the horizon. He swam for a long time, until the shore dwindled and dimmed into a hazy green band edged with white, but his limbs wearied and weakened and he made less and less effort and finally let the waves take him.

When they had several times drowned him and allowed him to surface they abandoned their sport with him and allowed his unresisting body to drift, just below the surface of their heaving troughs, like a dark mass of weed, washed this way and that, but always outward, towards the point where sea and sky fused, on the strong ebb-tide.

London-Connemara